

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™



TERROR FROM
OUTER SPACE

ROBERT VERNON



TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE



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FOCUS
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THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES

Canyon Quest

Mystery Lights of Navajo Mesa

Legend of the Desert Bigfoot

Escape from Fire Lake

Terror from Outer Space

Terror from Outer Space

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Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—1995

THE FOLKS IN THE SMALL, DUSTY TOWN of Ambrosia were certainly no strangers to spells of hot weather. But this particular late spring afternoon was turning out to be what the old-timers called “a real barn burner of a day.” Over 107 degrees according to the large thermometer that hung over Grundey’s Drugstore on the south side of town.

It was even hotter on the blacktop-covered roof of the EZ Industrial Storage building on the northeast side of town.

As the four members of the Last Chance Detectives made their way across its roof, their sneakers sank and slightly stuck in the soft roofing tar. The heat was unmerciful, radiating from both above and below. And to make matters worse, Mike Fowler and Ben Jones were struggling to carry Spence’s latest invention—a large, strange-looking device that weighed well over 150 pounds. The old building’s ceiling creaked and groaned with each heavy step.

“How much farther?” Ben complained.

Spencer Martin stopped next to a three-foot square skylight and knelt down. Sweat was beading on his brown skin. “Set it right here. As close to the skylight as possible.”

Mike and Ben set down the contraption with a loud thud.

Wynona “Winnie” Whitefeather brushed her long black hair out of her eyes and peered through an oversized pair of binoculars at the gravel road below. “The coast looks clear, guys. But hurry! It’s not getting any cooler up here!”

Spence snapped open the stabilizing legs on the strange-looking device. *Rappel-O-Matic* was stenciled in sloppy red letters on its side. Spence may not have been gifted in the graphic arts department, but he more than made up for it with his clever inventions. This latest contraption was a strange

combination of a car battery, an electric garage door opener, wires, pulleys, and counterweights, all strapped to a sturdy metal frame.

Mike pulled a crowbar out of his backpack and dug the business end under the edge of the skylight. At thirteen years old, Mike was not only a year ahead of his friends, but his easygoing self-confidence made him their natural leader.

“Now listen, guys. We go in and get out as quickly as possible,” he said. The skylight popped open with a loud creak, and Mike leaned the cover back, exposing a hole big enough for a person to drop through. “Spence, you sure that this thing can haul us back out of there?”

“Absolutely. I tested it with Ben in the harness several times.” Though Spence was a bit younger than the rest of his friends, his inventive mind and photographic memory made him an invaluable member of the team. “If it can successfully lift Ben’s weight, the rest of us should be a breeze.” Spence suddenly realized how insensitive his remark must have sounded and looked sheepishly over his glasses. “No offense, Ben,” he said.

“None taken.” Ben shrugged. “Mom says I just got a husky frame.”

Ben was a little heavy for his age. He was what some folks might call chubby. With wavy hair, freckles, and a quick smile, Ben liked video games and comic books more than sports and school. As for nutrition—he never met a candy bar or pizza he didn’t like (as long as anchovies weren’t involved). His contribution to the team was his wild imagination that got everyone thinking outside the box. Besides that, he had a good sense of humor that never failed to lighten the mood of everyone around him.

“Okay. We go in one at a time.” Mike stepped into the rappelling harness and pulled back his leather jacket in order to clip himself into the line attached to the Rappel-O-Matic. No matter the weather, Mike always wore his trademark A2 flight jacket. Today it made him look a little like Indiana Jones about to drop into an ancient catacomb. “Spence, do you think you should stay up top just in case?”

“We should be fine as long as I have this remote.” Spence adjusted his glasses and held up a simple garage door controller for them to examine. “Besides, I want to see what’s in there too.”

Mike straddled the open skylight and eased his weight into the harness. “Hit it, Spence!”

With a click of Spence’s remote, the Rappel-O-Matic whirled to life and started to slowly let out line.

As Mike sank into the darkness below, the walkie-talkie at his waist suddenly crackled to life.

“Hello? Mike? You there?”

Mike immediately recognized his mom’s voice. Gail Fowler usually had her hands full serving customers at the Last Chance Gas and Diner, but she was never too busy to keep tabs on her only son’s whereabouts.

“Mike Fowler? Do you read me?” she persisted.

As Mike continued to descend into the vast storage facility below, he lifted the walkie-talkie to his mouth. “Mother Hen, it is imperative that strict radio protocol be maintained during all covert missions.”

“Oh! Uh . . .” Gail lowered her voice to make it sound as official as possible. *“Sorry, Desert Eagle.”*

“That’s okay, Mom.” Mike chuckled as his feet hit the dusty concrete floor. “I was just teasing.”

Mike unbuckled himself, stepped out of the harness, and gave the line a quick tug. “Okay, Ben, you’re next!”

Mike’s two-way radio crackled back to life. *“Listen, Mike. I know you’ve got permission from the owner to go in there, but if your hunch is right and somebody is illegally using that place to hide stolen goods . . .”* Even over the walkie-talkie speaker, Gail sounded a bit worried. *“Well, I just want you kids to be careful.”*

“We will,” Mike assured her as he sent the line back up to Spence.

“I also wanted to tell you,” Gail continued, *“because of a hurricane system over Florida, it looks like the space shuttle is being diverted to Edwards Air Force Base after all.”*

“Tomorrow night?”

“Yep.”

"All right!" Mike exclaimed. "Does Pop think he can rig up the radio in time?"

"He's working on it right now. Be sure to tell Winnie and Spence that they're welcome to join us."

"Tell her we'll be there!" Spence called down. "Whoa, careful, Ben!"

Ben had somehow gotten himself tangled in the line on the way down and was now hanging sideways, slowly spinning in a wide circle.

"Need a little help here!" Ben called as he flailed about.

"I already spoke to Mrs. Jones," Gail continued. "Tell Ben that she said he could spend the night. Ben is there with you, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he's sort of hanging around." Mike laughed as he grabbed Ben and helped steady him on his feet.

"Mike?" Gail sounded as though she sensed she might be missing something. *"Are you sure everything's okay?"*

"No worries, Mother Hen. Tell Pop I'll be back as soon as I can to give him a hand." Mike unhooked Ben and sent the line back up to Spence.

"All right, Desert Eagle. This is Mother Hen signing off. And, Mike?"

"I know," Mike assured her. "Be careful!"



Once Winnie had rappelled down and joined Mike and Ben in the dusty warehouse, they turned their attention to the surrounding darkness.

Their flashlight beams revealed a large room filled with boxes and tarps covering various odd-shaped objects. Shadows danced across the walls as the kids wandered deeper into the room to investigate.

"Look! Right there! That's my stolen bike!" Ben exclaimed. "I knew Buchanan and his gang took it!"

"Kachina dolls! These are definitely from my grandmother's trading post," Winnie said. Winnie was proud of her Navajo heritage. Her family lived on the nearby

reservation and ran the very successful Tres Rios Trading Post on historic Route 66. She picked up one of the kachina dolls and examined its base. “Yep. Even has our price tag still on it.”

Their flashlight beams revealed dozens of car stereos, television sets, and various appliances—some still in their original boxes.

“This place is full of stolen stuff from all over town,” Winnie whispered.

“And check this out.” Mike lifted a large tarp, revealing a white, four-door convertible. “Widow Stevens’ Buick! This thing’s been missing since last fall.”

“Oh, just wait until Sheriff Smitty sees all this stuff!” Ben pumped his fist victoriously in the air. “Scott Buchanan is so busted!”



Scott Buchanan scowled as he eased his beat-up '78 Ford pickup onto the Sixth Street gravel road. But, then again, he was always scowling. Whether his mood was happy, sad, or indifferent—that scowl was a permanent fixture. Buchanan was in his late teens and was known around town as the local troublemaker. He had an arrest record to back it up. He was known to hang out with two other high school dropouts, Shorty Reese and Brent Fischer. They were currently in the back of his pickup, struggling to keep a top-heavy, tarp-covered object from tipping over as the truck came to a quick stop at the EZ Industrial Storage building.

“Hey! Take it easy!” one of them yelled.

“Take it easy yourself!” Buchanan growled as his powerfully built frame exited the vehicle and let down the tailgate of the truck. “Get that stupid thing outta there before someone sees us!”

“At least give us a hand!” Shorty called.

Ignoring them, Buchanan started fishing through his pockets, searching for the keys to the storage facility. “You’re the masterminds who stole that piece of junk. Deal with it yourselves.”

As Shorty and Brent struggled with their prize, the tarp slipped, revealing a fiberglass figure of a smiling boy in checkered overalls, holding a hamburger. This goofy-looking figure had been the mascot of Ambrosia's one and only Burger Boy Restaurant for well over forty years until it went missing several days earlier. Shorty's foot slipped, and the figure teetered on the edge of the tailgate, before finally falling backward into the truck bed with a loud crash.



Inside the warehouse, Spence was in mid-descent when he heard the crash. "What was that?"

Everyone froze and listened. After a moment, they could distinctly hear nearby voices arguing.

"Oh, no!" Ben looked around frantically. "Not now!"

Spence quickly punched the button on his remote and the Rappel-O-Matic began lifting him back up.

As Mike and Winnie looked for cover, Ben ran up and grasped at Spence. "Don't go!" he pleaded. "Take me with you!"

"Get away, Ben!" Spence hoarsely whispered as he continued to ascend. "It can't hold us both at the same time!"



The fiberglass figure smiled lazily up at the sky as Buchanan's two cohorts in crime carried it to the large door of the warehouse he was unlocking. The padlock snapped open, and Buchanan tossed it at Shorty, hitting him squarely between the eyes.

"Ow! What was that for?" Shorty asked as he rubbed the sore spot.

"For jeopardizing this sweet operation for a lousy, fiberglass dork!" Buchanan grouched.

"Hey, this thing's worth some bank. It's a collectible!" Shorty argued.

"Yeah? Well, where you gonna sell it?" Buchanan's tone

was derisive.

"Well," Shorty mumbled. "I don't know."

"Exactly!" Buchanan put his shoulder into the door and pushed, and the door crashed open. "Now get that thing in here before someone sees you."

Struggling to get the figure through the door, the two followed Buchanan as he strode into the center of the large room.

"I swear, if Sheriff Smitty caught us with that thing on the way here, you two would've wished you'd never been bor—" Buchanan's sentence trailed off as he looked around suspiciously.

"What's the matter?" Brent asked.

Buchanan's eyes narrowed. "Somethin's not right."

Unnoticed, but hanging directly above them, Spence held his breath and prayed they wouldn't look up. A bead of sweat slowly rolled off his nose and dropped before he could catch it. The droplet seemed to hang in the air for an eternity before it fell directly in front of Buchanan. He didn't see it. And it only made a light splat as it hit the pavement. But it was enough to draw Buchanan's attention to the cement floor. His eyes widened as he noticed fresh sneaker prints in the thick dust. Prints that disappeared under a large tarp.

Buchanan lunged forward and yanked the tarp back, revealing Widow Stevens' Buick. Ben sat in the driver's seat, his eyes as wide as saucers. Mike sat next to him in the passenger seat and acknowledged they'd been caught with a slight wave of the hand. Winnie smiled sheepishly from the backseat.

Pure rage turned Buchanan's face a deep shade of red.

"You're probably wondering what we're doing in here," Ben said rather meekly. "You see, it's just that—" As he spoke, Ben casually reached forward and punched a button on his door. All four doors of the car locked in unison.

"Good thinking, Ben!" Winnie exclaimed.

"Ha! Can't get us now, can you, Mr. Tough Guy?" Ben was suddenly full of bravado. "You're just gonna have to wait out there with your silly little friends until we're good and ready

to come out. And we've got a walkie-talkie! So, you better get outta here before we call for—”

Ben was mid-sentence when Buchanan coolly grabbed the soft-top roof in his huge, powerful hands. With one quick swipe he easily tore a huge swath of the old material back.

Ben looked up through the gaping hole in the roof and could only get out a small, pathetic, “Help.”

“Now, take it easy, Buchanan,” Mike said.

An evil grin grew across Buchanan's face as he cracked his knuckles. “Mike Fowler . . . Ben Jones . . . Oh, I'm gonna enjoy this!”

With nowhere to run, Ben nervously gripped the steering wheel and turned to Mike. “Do something, Mike!”

Ben always turned to Mike when they were in a fix. For that matter, so did Winnie and Spence. Mike was a quick, creative thinker. And when faced with a problem, he often came up with a solution that was both bold and decisive. This time was no different.

Mike quickly reached over and turned the key in the ignition. The car roared to life.

Ben suddenly realized Mike's plan. “No! Wait! Wait!”

Mike threw the car into gear and stomped on the accelerator in front of Ben.

The Buick's wheels momentarily spun in place before catching traction and fishtailing forward. Buchanan and his pals could only jump clear as the Buick crashed through the aluminum doors of the storage facility.

Winnie let out a scream and slapped her hands over her eyes. “I can't look!”

Being twelve years old, Ben Jones had fairly limited driving experience. He had driven a Big Wheel, several bicycles, a quad runner, and even a sand rail once (which he ended up crashing), but never a full-sized car. He hung onto the wheel, whimpering, as Mike, who still had his foot pressed firmly on the accelerator, tried to drive from the passenger seat. The Buick rocketed forward, barely missing Buchanan's pickup, and then continued on, swerving wildly from side to side down Sixth Street.

Buchanan burst from the warehouse and jumped into the pickup. Shorty and Brent were right on his heels and barely had time to dive into the bed of the truck. Buchanan gunned the truck, spraying gravel and dust in all directions, and headed after the Buick.

All was suddenly quiet back in the storage warehouse. Spence slowly swung back and forth in the safety of his harness, watching as the two vehicles sped off toward the heart of town. "I've got a feeling that's not going to end well," he stated.

Chapter 2

AMBROSIA HAD ONCE BEEN a busy, thriving town. In the 1920s, it had blossomed like a desert rose, servicing historic Route 66, the main artery for travelers making their way across America. Surrounded by miles of unforgiving desert, the town was a welcome oasis offering fuel, food, and rest to the road-weary traveler. But in the early 1970s, when Interstate 40 bypassed 66 as a more direct route, Ambrosia was left behind in the proverbial dust. Ambrosia was now a mere ghost town of what it had once been, appealing only to those tourists who were willing to venture off the well-beaten path on a quest to experience the Americana of a bygone era.

And in that regard, Ambrosia didn't disappoint.

A Wig-Wam Motor Lodge (where tourists could sleep in concrete teepees), several American Indian trading posts, the "world's largest" snow cone, and even a giant meteor crater tour were just a few of the many attractions in Ambrosia. These were small, mom-and-pop businesses that were in stiff competition with each other. Neon signs and brightly colored billboards with preposterous claims tried to entice the passing motorist. The more outlandish and eclectic the appeal the better.

It was this line of thinking that had inspired the owner and namesake of Big Al's Tire City. A freshly painted sign boasted, "The Tallest Tower of Tires!" And on this day, a crane was creating an impossibly tall stack of retreads—with every tire painted in the brightest, most fluorescent colors imaginable.

Big Al looked on, excitedly rolling a toothpick back and forth in his mouth.

With one last belch of smoke, the crane set the last tire safely in place at the top of the tower, just like the crowning star on a Christmas tree.

The crane operator leaned out of his cab. “Well, that just about does it, Big Al. Just gotta secure it all with a cable. Like it?”

Big Al hooked his thumbs behind his suspenders as he admired his technicolor monstrosity. He struggled to even find the words. “Why it’s so tall! So colorful! So . . . DANDY!”

Had Big Al not been so focused on his latest marketing masterpiece, he might’ve heard the roar and squealing tires of two approaching vehicles.



Mike Fowler cautiously took his hands off the steering wheel of the speeding Buick. “You got it, Ben?”

Looking a little more relaxed, Ben nodded and slowly smiled—a mixture of nerves and growing confidence. “This isn’t so bad. I’m doing it! I’m actually driving a car!”

From where she sat in the backseat, Winnie could see Buchanan’s truck starting to catch up. “Well, you better start driving it faster. Here they come!”

“What? Where?” Panicked, Ben couldn’t help but turn around and see for himself.

“Ben!” Winnie yelled. “Don’t take your eyes off the road!”

The warning came too late. The Buick missed a turn, hit a curb, and launched into the air. It arced slowly up before leveling off and crashing directly through Big Al’s Technicolor Tower of Tires.

Brightly colored tires exploded in all directions like bowling pins. Some seemed to rain down from the sky.

Somehow, Ben regained control of the Buick and steered it back onto the road, leaving most of the chaos in his wake.

A split second later, Buchanan’s truck dodged right and then left in a sea of rolling, spinning, bouncing tires, not slowing down for a moment!



Several blocks away, on the porch of the Hi-Desert Hardware

store, two old gents were partaking in a daily afternoon ritual—drinking sweet tea while playing a friendly game of checkers.

“Gotten pretty quiet around here since the heat wave,” said one, wearing thick coke-bottle glasses and studying the board.

The other just grunted and pushed his John Deere hat a bit farther back on his bald, sweaty head.

The approaching sound of roaring engines and squealing tires caught both men’s attention. Widow Stevens’ Buick raced by, accompanied by the sound of screaming kids. The Buick was immediately followed by a beat-up pickup and the sound of angry shouting. Finally, bringing up the rear was a herd of brightly colored tires, bouncing this way and that.

The old gents stoically took it all in for several moments until the last tire had rolled by.

“That’s somethin’ you don’t see every day,” one of them pointed out.

The other simply grunted as they returned to their game.



The Buick continued to pick up speed as it merged onto Main Street in the center of town. Ben barely missed a parked car, causing Winnie to let out a short, frightened scream from the backseat.

“No screaming! I can’t concentrate with you screaming!” Ben demanded. Somehow, he’d inadvertently turned the windshield wipers on.

“Ben, you better slow down!” Mike warned. “There’s a turn up ahead!”

Ben tried to pump the brakes, but the pedal went to the floor with no resistance. He looked in horror over to Mike. “There *are* no brakes!”

“What?!” Winnie screamed.

“No screaming!” Ben screamed back.

Mike tried to remain calm. “Okay. Emergency brake! Hit the emergency brake!”

Ben grabbed for the lever. “You mean this?”

With a loud, spring-like noise, the hood of the Buick suddenly popped up, caught the wind like a sail, and completely obscured their view.

Now they were all screaming.



Half a mile away, in the parking lot of Paco’s Auto Detailing, Sheriff Theodore Smitty paced around his newly detailed truck like a drill sergeant on inspection day. His eyes darted back and forth, looking for even the smallest water spot or wax streak.

“So, what do you think, Sheriff?” Paco asked.

The newly washed and waxed truck sparkled in the afternoon sun.

“Pretty good, Paco. Pretty good.” Smitty dabbed his hanky on his tongue and then gently removed a speck of dust from the hood.

Smitty had been Ambrosia’s duly elected peacekeeper for almost twenty years, and he wore the star on his chest proudly. At six feet tall, with a bulky frame, he was an imposing figure, and he carried himself with a commanding presence that had been developed from leading a U.S. Marine platoon through the jungles of Vietnam for four years.

Smitty would never get rich on the modest sheriff salary, but one of the perks of his position was that every five years the city provided him with a brand-new truck. He didn’t actually own it, the city did; but he cared for each truck like it was his own. And this one was brand spanking new. The dealership had just dropped it off two days earlier after outfitting it with an emergency light bar, a siren, a police radio, and a sheriff’s decal on the door.

Paco opened the driver’s door, and then he noticed Smitty’s freshly pressed uniform and spit-shined black boots. “Ooh-wee! Just look at you, dressed all spiffy like that. What’s the occasion, Sheriff?”

“Well, not that it’s anyone else’s business . . .” Smitty

began.

“No,” Paco agreed. “I was only curious.”

Smitty tossed his cowboy hat onto the truck’s bench seat before getting in. “It just so happens that I have a very important dinner date this evening, and I want to make a good impression.”

“You sly dog!” Paco gingerly closed the door, careful not to leave any handprints in the truck’s freshly waxed finish. “Watch out for those potholes now!”

Smitty glanced at himself in the rearview mirror, straightened his bolo tie, smoothed his mustache, and was just starting to ease out onto the highway when he noticed two fast-approaching vehicles going well over the speed limit. He hoped it was only a trick of the light, but at first glance it appeared that one of the speeding vehicles had its hood up.

Ben couldn’t see a thing past the windshield. He was as good as blind. But luckily the last half mile of road had been fairly straight, and so far—knock on wood—they hadn’t hit anything.

Mike leaned out his window and tried to peer around the open hood. “More to the right, Ben! More to the right!”

“This way?” Ben squealed.

“No, your *other* right!” Mike shouted.

“Just worry about the emergency brake, Ben!” Winnie leaned over his shoulder and pointed toward the floor. “It’s somewhere down there!”

Buchanan’s truck gave the Buick a threatening bump from behind, and then pulled to the right in an attempt to come alongside the car.

Just as Buchanan pulled up alongside the Buick, Ben realized the emergency brake was not a lever he needed to pull. It was a small pedal on the left side, near the floor, that he needed to step on.

“Found it!” Ben stomped on the brake as hard as he could.

Immediately the Buick’s tires locked up, and the sudden deceleration of the car caused the hood to slam back down into place. The three passengers looked up and were horrified to see that Sheriff Smitty’s truck was only thirty yards ahead

—directly in their path.

“Look out!” was all Mike could yell.

Ben yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, and—not so much by skill as by sheer blind luck—he missed the sheriff’s truck by mere inches.

Buchanan had not been so lucky. He’d been so focused on exacting his revenge that he didn’t see Smitty’s truck until it was too late. He hit the brakes hard with both feet and tried to veer away, but it wasn’t enough. His truck sideswiped Smitty’s vehicle from stem to stern. With a sickening metallic screech, Buchanan’s truck glanced off the truck and skidded a dozen more yards before crashing into a tamale stand.

Smitty sat momentarily stunned in his truck. He wondered if perhaps it could all be just a bad dream he would wake up from at any moment. The squawk of his police radio told him it wasn’t.

“Sheriff Smitty, come in.” It was Arlene—Ambrosia’s highly excitable police dispatcher. *“Be on the lookout for two cars racing down the west side of Main Street. Over.”*

Smitty took a deep breath and rubbed his temples with his index fingers. After a moment, he decided he’d better get out and lay down some safety road flares. But the door wouldn’t budge. Smitty put his shoulder into it and the door finally gave, falling out of his hand and crashing to the pavement.

Spence arrived on a bike just as Ben, Mike, and Winnie were piling out of the Buick.

“Are you guys okay?” Spence asked.

Winnie looked down, checking to make sure all her limbs were still attached. “I think so.”

“Way to go, Ben!” Mike laughed and gave his friend a high five.

A few moments later, Smitty was in the process of handcuffing Buchanan and his pals when Ben ran up to him.

“We did it, Smitty! The Last Chance Detectives solved another one! *And* we brought the culprits right to you! Can you believe it?”

“That was *you* driving, Ben?”

“Yeah! That was me all right!” Ben puffed out his chest

proudly.

“Did you put the car into park?” Smitty asked.

Ben’s face went blank. “Huh?”

“That’s what I thought.” Smitty pushed his way past Ben and began to run.

Ben turned to see the Buick slowly rolling toward some storefronts. Smitty caught up to the car just as it sheared off a fire hydrant, sending up a thirty-foot fountain of water.

Smitty now had a demolished truck and a splitting headache, and was thoroughly drenched to the skin. He could only watch as a lone bright orange tire rolled past him and continued down Main Street.

Chapter 3

THE LAST CHANCE GAS AND DINER had been built on old Route 66 in the early 1930s. It earned its name because it was located on the outskirts of Ambrosia and was literally the last chance motorists had to fuel up their car and get a bite to eat before traveling over 150 miles of unforgiving, barren desert to the next small town.

Mike's grandparents, Pop and Kate Fowler, owned the establishment. Pop Fowler ran the gas station and garage. Grandma Fowler oversaw the attached diner. Mike and his mom chipped in to help the family business whenever they could. The entire operation had earned the Fowler family a decent living for well over fifty years—ever since Pop had returned from the Second World War.

During the war, Pop Fowler had been the pilot of a B-17 Flying Fortress called the *Lady Liberty*. The old warbird had faithfully seen him and his crew through many dangerous missions. Somehow, she always delivered them safely back home.

After the war, in the 1950s, the Air Force found itself with thousands of aircraft on its hands that it no longer had any use for. The *Lady Liberty* was among them. Her fate? Either to be sold for civilian use, or to be chopped up as scrap, smelted, and turned into aluminum ingots.

Pop couldn't bear the thought of the *Lady Liberty* being destroyed, so he purchased her for what the government was asking at the time—five thousand dollars. Then he gave the plane a permanent home outside the diner, where he could keep an eye on her every day.

In return, the *Lady Liberty* became a legitimate roadside attraction, drawing customers to the Last Chance Gas and Diner. But to Mike and his fellow detectives, the B-17 served another function that was even more important.

The *Lady Liberty* was the official clubhouse of the Last Chance Detectives. The four kids met inside regularly to go over the latest local mysteries they were working on.

Most of the cases they took on were small jobs, ranging from finding lost cats to exposing things like Buchanan's stolen-goods operation. But some cases grew into much bigger affairs. In just the last year, they had begun to earn quite a reputation, having solved mysteries having to do with museum-artifact smuggling, UFO sightings, and a desert Bigfoot monster.

But this morning, Mike was too busy helping out at the Last Chance Gas and Diner to be able to give the detective business much of his attention. He was cleaning the front window of the diner with a squeegee when Ben rode up on his bicycle.

"Mike!" Ben called.

"What's up, Ben?"

"Check this out!" Ben reached into the basket on the front of his bicycle and then handed Mike a copy of the local newspaper. "Yesterday's case made the front page! They even printed our picture!"

Mike couldn't help but smile as he looked at the newspaper. Halfway down the front page, bold letters proclaimed: "Kid Detectives Solve Another Case." Next to the story was a picture of all four kids proudly grinning as they stood next to a water-drenched Sheriff Smitty. Smitty wasn't smiling.

"Not a very good picture of Smitty, though," Ben pointed out.

"Looks like someone is trying to steal the top headlines," a cheerful voice called from behind them. "But not from *my* husband you don't!"

Mike and Ben turned to see Rebekah Schaeffer—a pretty woman in her thirties—just getting out of her parked car with her two small daughters. Chloe was almost two years old and had curly blonde hair. Her older sister, Rachel, was going on six.

"Good morning, Mrs. Schaeffer. Hey, girls!" Mike waved.

“Now, I don’t mean to take anything away from you kids, but just take a look at the headline at the top of the page,” she teased, pointing at her own copy of the newspaper.

Mike’s eyes scanned to the bold headline at the top of the front page: “Local Hero to Pilot Shuttle Home Today.” Below was a picture of a ruggedly handsome man who was cradling a space helmet. It was Rebekah’s husband, Ron Schaeffer.

Mike’s dad, John Fowler, had gone to high school with Ron. Since they both shared a love of flying, they had quickly become best friends and agreed to join the Air Force together. But their careers eventually took them down different paths. Mike’s dad had become a fighter pilot, while Ron Schaeffer was recruited to be part of the NASA Astronaut Corps. He had now reached the rank of commander, and his current assignment was piloting the space shuttle *Explorer*. Its five-day mission was almost complete. All that remained was for the shuttle to reenter the earth’s atmosphere and execute a safe landing. If all continued according to plan, the *Explorer* would land within the next half hour.

The prime landing site was usually the Shuttle Landing Facility at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, a purpose-built landing strip. But bad weather routinely caused almost half the missions to be diverted to a dry lake bed within Edwards Air Force Base in California. Such was the case now. An unpredictable weather system in Florida meant the space shuttle *Explorer* would be diverted. Its new reentry flight path would bring it directly over Ambrosia. The craft would be flying at an altitude too high to be seen with the naked eye, but since it would be traveling at twice the speed of sound, it would make its presence known as it passed with two loud sonic booms.

“We’ve got a front-row seat, eh, boys?” Rebekah said as she lifted Chloe out of the car seat in the backseat.

“Sure do!” Mike called back.

Mike’s mom came out of the diner, wiping her hands on her apron. She was tall with curly blonde hair and kind eyes. She rushed to help Mrs. Schaeffer unload the kids out of the car. “Rebekah, let me give you a hand!”

"Thanks, Gail." Rebekah handed her a bag. "I sure hope you know how much inviting us to listen in on Pop's ham radio means to me and the girls. The TV networks don't even air these landings anymore. Guess the general public got bored of watching them after a while."

"Nonsense! This is so exciting! Everybody thinks so." Gail pointed to the girls' matching dresses. "Why, you girls look so beautiful!"

"Pretty," Chloe added.

"Wow!" Gail smiled. "Chloe's already talking so well."

"*Pretty* is her newest word," Rebekah said proudly.

"C'mon, let's get inside. We don't want to miss anything." Gail led them to the diner's entry. "Pop has the radio all set up. And I just put out some freshly made cupcakes for the girls."

Ben's eyes suddenly lit up. "The kind you make that have those chocolate pudding fillings?"

"That's right, Ben," Gail said with a smile in her voice.

"The ones with the colored sprinkles?"

"Uh-huh!"

Without another word, Ben dropped his bike and ran to follow the women into the diner. Mike turned back to finish the windows.

His mom paused at the door. Rachel was still outside wandering toward Mike.

"Rachel? Are you coming, sweetie?" Gail asked.

"Can I ask Mike something?" Rachel asked bashfully.

"Sure, Rachel," Mike said with a nod. "It's okay, Mom. We'll be right in."

Mike dropped his squeegee into the bucket and knelt next to the little girl. "So, what's up, Rachel? What do you want to know?"

She just stood there fidgeting bashfully for a moment, and then pointed to the B-17 parked beside the diner. "Um, is that your daddy's plane?"

"The *Lady Liberty*? No. That's the plane my grandpa flew a long time ago."

Rachel looked at him, puzzled. "But my mommy said your

daddy was a pilot too.”

“That’s right. He is, Rachel.”

“So, where’s his plane? And where’s your daddy?”

“He, uh . . .” Mike stammered, not knowing where to start. He looked down into the water in his bucket. “That’s a tough question to answer, Rachel.”

It was a question Mike had struggled with for most of his young life. He hadn’t seen his dad in more than seven years. The last time they had been together was at Mike’s sixth birthday celebration. His dad had given Mike a compass and a pocket Bible for his birthday and told him, “As long as you keep these with you, your path will always be straight.”

Mike could still picture exactly how his dad had looked that day. “I may not always be here for you, Mike,” his dad had said. “But God will.”

And that was the last memory Mike had of his dad. A few days later, John Fowler simply vanished.

Mike’s dad had been flying a classified mission in an undisclosed area of the Middle East when his F-16 fighter jet went down. The wreckage of the plane was eventually located, but mysteriously, no trace of John Fowler’s body was ever recovered. Technically, the Air Force had him listed as “Missing in Action.” But it had been years now without any fresh clues or real answers.

Most people in town thought John Fowler must have died in that crash. But Mike didn’t believe it. Somehow, he knew that his dad was still alive. He could just feel it.

And that’s why Mike started the Last Chance Detectives. He thought that if he developed his investigative skills, maybe someday he’d be able to get to the bottom of the mystery and finally bring his dad back home.

Mike looked up from the water in his bucket to Rachel, who was still waiting for an answer. “Hey, we better go inside,” he said. “The space shuttle transmission should start any moment now.”

“But what about your dad and his plane?” Rachel asked, following him toward the entrance to the diner.

“Well, you see, my dad is on this very secret mission.”

Mike opened the door for her. “But soon, hopefully, he’ll be coming home just like your dad.”



Inside the diner, Pop Fowler and Spence had set up a ham radio transceiver and large speaker on the lunch counter. A small group of locals huddled around Pop as he tuned the radio’s controls with one hand and clamped a headset tight against his ear with the other.

“Are you sure this is going to work, Pop?” Grandma Fowler asked skeptically.

“It should. I’ve tuned into the frequency NASA uses, but it’s not coming in too clear. I think our antenna just needs a little adjusting.”

A wire from the back of the transceiver snaked its way to the far side of the room where Spence stood. Spence lifted the antenna over his head. “Is this any better, Pop?”

“Higher, Spence! Higher!” Pop called back.

Spence climbed up onto the seat of one of the dining booths. “How is it now?”

“Stronger, but—” Pop listened intently to his headset and finally shook his head. “Nope! We need it higher still. Climb onto the table!”

“The table? Are you sure?”

“We can wash the tablecloth, Spence. Go ahead,” Gail assured him.

Spence gingerly climbed onto the table. Under his weight it started to tilt, but he quickly moved to the center. Now somewhat balanced, he held up the antenna high over his head.

“That’s better.” Pop nodded. “But if you could get it just a little bit higher!”

Spence went up onto his tiptoes, straining to reach as high as his short stature would allow.

Pop suddenly brightened. “That’s it! Perfect, Spence. Don’t move a muscle.”

Spence’s eyes widened at the instruction to continue

holding the awkward position.

"Listen to this, everybody!" Pop flicked a toggle switch, turning on the large speaker on the counter.

"—*velocity reading: 12,802 per second. Range to go: 433 nautical miles,*" a calm voice stated.

"That's Ron!" Rebekah Schaeffer exclaimed as a cheer arose from the small crowd in the diner.

"That's my dad!" Rachel stared, wide-eyed, at the radio.

"Yay! It works!" Spence momentarily lowered his arms in all the excitement and the signal became distorted.

"Quit moving, Spence!" Ben shouted, through a mouthful of cupcake.

"Shh!" Gail held her index finger up to her lips. "Listen!"

"*Roger that, Explorer.*" This voice sounded clearer and had the unmistakable, official ring of the flight director of NASA mission control. "*We have twenty-five seconds and counting to reentry interface—*"

"*Cabin pressure's looking good.*" Commander Schaeffer sounded calm and cool as he transmitted from over thirty miles above the earth's surface. "*H2 and O2 tanks are at a stable 700 psi.*"

Little Chloe let out a delighted squeal from her mother's arms. Recognizing her father's voice, she reached toward the speaker. "Daddyyyy!"

"That's right, honey. Daddy's coming home!" Rebekah laughed.

"*Looking good from down here, Explorer. Your flight speed and trajectory are right on the bubble.*"

"*Mission Control, with your permission, I think I'll set her down right here,*" Commander Schaeffer joked. "*I can see my hometown of Ambrosia just down below.*"

Everyone in the diner went crazy, cheering.

"*That's a negatory, Explorer,*" the flight director joked back. "*They tell me that bucket of bolts of yours turns into a pumpkin if you don't get it back to NASA in time.*"

"*Well, as long as you put it that way I guess—HEY!*" The transmission from the shuttle suddenly cut off.

Everyone in the diner looked at each other, puzzled. The

voices they had been listening to had sounded so calm and casual up to that point. But was that a yell they had heard before the transmission cut out?

“Explorer?” The flight director remained calm. He waited for several long seconds. After receiving no response, he tried again. “Explorer? *Please respond. Over.*”

“Houston—*be advised.*” Ron Schaeffer’s voice was back but no longer calm. What sounded like shouting—and perhaps a struggle—could be heard in the background of his transmission. “*We’ve got a—NO!—Get—*”

The transmission went dead again.

“*Go ahead, Explorer. Say again.*”

Everyone in the diner held their breaths and stared at the transceiver, which remained eerily quiet.

Several moments later, they heard, “*Mayday! Mayday! May—*” Commander Schaeffer never finished his sentence. His transmission cut out with a loud snap of static electricity.

Rebekah Schaeffer gasped and clutched her daughter tight. Pop checked the frequency, but the cutout wasn’t a result of the antenna.

“Explorer!” It was flight control again. “Explorer, *do you copy?*”

The diner was dead quiet as everyone waited for Commander Schaeffer to respond.

“Explorer, *this is Houston. Do you read me?*”

There was still no response. Rebekah Schaeffer’s eyes slowly filled with tears.

“What’s the matter, Mommy?” Rachel asked.

BOOM!

A thunderous explosion suddenly rocked the diner. People screamed, dishes rattled, and the windows shook so violently that Pop thought they might break.

Mike sprinted out of the diner to see what had happened. Pop was right behind him. Several people followed, including Rebekah Schaeffer and the girls.

Pop and Mike scanned the horizon and saw nothing out of the ordinary. But when they looked up toward the sky, their expressions turned to horror.

Rebekah followed their gaze, and when she saw what they were looking at, she screamed.

A large smoke cloud hung high in the upper atmosphere. Extremely bright burning fragments—that originated from the center of the cloud—streaked slowly across the sky, leaving trails of smoke.

“No . . . No . . .” Rebekah collapsed to her knees beside her daughter Rachel. “Oh, Lord. No!”

“What’s that, Mommy?” Rachel pointed to the burning fragments. They almost looked like fireworks.

Pop and Mike looked at each other, anguish on their faces.

Rebekah hugged her daughter with her free arm and tried to cover her eyes. “No, honey. Don’t look at it. Don’t look!”

In Rebekah’s other arm, little Chloe reached for the bright burning lights in the sky and smiled. “Pretty!”

Chapter 4

LYLE AND SKYE WILSON lived in a trailer home far outside the city limits of Ambrosia. Their nearest neighbor was an abandoned military base nearly a mile away. They liked the seclusion because they thought it helped get their inner selves more in tune with nature.

The Wilsons were flower children of the 1960s, and they still embraced the lifestyle and looked the part even though they were now in their late forties. Lyle hadn't cut his beard or ponytail in years, and Skye was partial to beads, bandanas, and tie-dyed sundresses.

They had moved to the desert to try their hand at gardening. Lyle had read a book about the Hohokam Indians, an ancient vegetarian tribe that grew various crops in the Southwest—or the “Valley of the Sun,” as they liked to call it. The theory was that minerals found only in the desert would give their squash and herbs a medicinal quality that supposedly slowed the aging process.

The Wilsons' trailer sat next to a modest garden. The garden was surrounded by a fence that was meant to keep jackrabbits out. A scarecrow making a peace sign with its gloved fingers kept watch over the vegetables. A wooden windmill painted to look like a sunflower stood off to the side of the trailer. It pumped water out of a natural spring and into the garden's irrigation system. Lyle and Skye had designed the pump to blend into the natural surroundings as much as possible.

But the Wilsons hadn't turned their backs completely on all modern advances. Lyle had installed a large satellite dish on the top of their trailer so that they could watch PBS, old television reruns, and their favorite movies. He had painted the metal dish into a bright yellow happy face.

As the last rays of sunlight dipped behind the horizon,

Skye lit a fresh jasmine incense cone, and Lyle dropped into his beanbag chair to watch TV.

"The nation mourns the loss of the seven astronauts on board the space shuttle Explorer," a sober-looking newscaster reported. "On a routine mission to retrieve a data-gathering satellite, something went terribly wrong late this morning as the Explorer and her crew were attempting to reenter Earth's atmosphere."

The image on the screen cut away to a replay of the terrible explosion.

"What a bummer!" Lyle shook his head. "Can you believe it, babe?"

"No word yet from NASA on what could have caused this disaster," the reporter continued. "But we'll be sure to bring you the latest breaking developments as this story continues to unfold. Now back to our regularly scheduled program."

The news program blinked off, and an old, black-and-white sci-fi movie filled the screen.

"Those poor people," Skye said in her small, timid-sounding voice. "What could have caused such a thing?"

"I don't know, Skye, but . . ." Lyle's words trailed off as his eyes fell on the TV screen.

In the old movie that was being televised, goofy-looking aliens that seemed to be a cross between humans and octopuses were marching out of their spaceships to begin their conquest of earth. Their foam-rubber octopus arms waved around wildly, clearly being animated with wires.

Lyle's eyes widened. "Hey, man! Maybe the space shuttle crashed into something!" He pointed to the screen. "You know, like one of the far-out flying saucers in this movie!"

"Lyle, please." Skye shuddered and turned away from the TV set. "You know that stuff gives me the creeps."

"Yeah, okay. You don't dig the whole alien scene. That's cool. All I'm saying is that maybe it was, like, an accident. You know?"

Skye wasn't so sure. She walked over to the kitchenette as Lyle continued talking. "See, these alien cats are probably pacifists. You know, conscientious objectors like us."

Skye was doing her best to follow Lyle's train of thought, but as she stood there in the kitchenette, something caught her eye out the window.

A thick blanket of green fog rolled across the yard, obscuring her view of the garden.

"Lyle! There's some sort of fog outside."

"Fog? No, baby, there's never been any fog in this area. You're probably just seeing condensation on the window from doing the dishes."

Skye leaned forward and rubbed the window. There was no condensation on the glass. Outside, the green fog continued to slowly roll in. It was getting thicker by the second.

"Anyway"—Lyle was on a roll—"what probably went down is these little peaceful alien dudes were truckin' down here to pick up something they had stashed earlier, when *Bam!* Outta nowhere, here comes the space shuttle!"

Skye was barely listening. She couldn't take her eyes off what was unfolding just outside the window. As she peered into the thick mist, she noticed that there seemed to be something moving around within it. Something that was alive and getting closer.

"Lyle, I think there's something out there!"

Lyle continued watching the old movie. "Okay. See, you're just trippin' 'cause you've got a hang-up about these old alien movies."

The shape in the fog continued to grow larger as it moved closer. Skye could now make out what seemed to be a figure. It appeared to have multiple arms and legs that bent in unnatural ways. She couldn't stand to see any more. She pulled down the window blind and backed away.

Lyle turned to see that Skye was visibly shaking. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Can't you hear it?" she asked.

"Hear what?"

"Listen!"

Lyle leaned forward and turned off the television set. All was quiet. Then after a moment, he could clearly hear that,

indeed, something *was* moving around just outside the trailer.

A long, bubbly moan, accompanied by the sound of dragging footsteps, cut through the still of the night. Lyle slowly stood up, trying not to make a sound. Whatever was outside was now moving around to the front of the trailer.

Lyle turned to look at Skye, who was starting to whimper in fear. “What did you see out there?” he asked.

She was so frightened she barely managed to squeak out a single word, “Alien!”

“I knew it!” Lyle exclaimed.

To Skye’s horror, she noticed the doorknob behind Lyle was slowly turning. She desperately pointed at it and began backing away as Lyle turned to examine the door. The sound of the eerie moaning was still in the garden and getting closer.

Skye climbed onto the couch, pulled her feet up, and clutched a pillow to her chest. Her shoulder brushed the window blind behind her, triggering it to open. The sudden sound of the rolling spindle startled Skye, and she spun around to look. Just inches away—on the other side of the glass—stood her worst nightmare. The creature looked similar to the octo-alien they had just seen in the movie. Only this one’s arms weren’t being held up by wires. And it had no zipper running up the back of a fake rubber suit. No, the thing that stood outside the window looked absolutely, horribly, real. Its hideous mouth gaped open as it reached for her with its slimy tentacles. Large suction cups pulsated against the glass. Skye suddenly found her voice and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“Skye!” Lyle yelled, looking around frantically. “What is it?”

Still unable to speak, Skye pointed to the window, but there was no longer anything there.

“What did you see? Was it like a cute little alien in the movie *E.T.*?” he asked hopefully.

Skye shook her head no.

The trailer was suddenly rocked like it had been picked up roughly by a corner and then dropped back down.

Lyle steadied himself against the wall. “So, we’re

definitely talking an acid-for-blood, scary-type alien, huh?”

Skye nodded yes.

Again, the trailer took a massive hit—this one felt more like a mighty blow from a semitruck. Lyle was knocked to the floor. Cupboards emptied their contents. Ceiling tiles dropped. A shelf of record albums dropped and spilled out across the floor. Plants hanging from the ceiling fell and shattered the records to pieces.

“My vinyl record collection!” Lyle looked down at the carnage in horror. Albums lay shattered in pieces. It was then that something seemed to snap within him. “That does it!”

Lyle began to rush to the front door, but Skye followed and jumped in his path. “Lyle! You can’t go out there!”

“This has gone far enough!” He gently moved her aside. “Someone’s gonna pay!”

Lyle let out a wild war cry and kicked open the front door of the trailer. But when he got a look at what was outside, his eyes went wide, and he froze like a deer caught in the headlights.

In the middle of the garden, crushing the vegetables beneath it, sat a strange, silvery flying saucer. Lights strobed and pulsed on its fuselage as steam escaped from under its metallic base. The garden’s scarecrow lay in flames, having just been shot by a group of hideous, gurgling octo-aliens. Now turning toward Lyle, they lifted their weapons and took aim.

Chapter 5

NO ONE COULD REMEMBER a busier day in all of Ambrosia's history. Since that morning's space shuttle tragedy, national news crews and the curious general public had descended on the town like flies on a garbage heap.

Though it was getting near closing time, the Last Chance Gas and Diner was still buzzing with activity. Grandma Fowler and her kitchen staff were just recovering from that evening's rush of out-of-town visitors.

Mike was expected to help out at the diner whenever things got to be too much to handle for the regular staff. And today had been one of those times. The diner was just starting to empty, and he was busy clearing away dirty dishes. Above him, in the corner of the room, the nightly news was playing on the TV.

"Most people probably haven't heard of the sleepy town of Ambrosia before," the television reporter began. *"But today that all changed. This is not only the nearest town to where this morning's space shuttle accident occurred, it also happens to be the hometown of one of the crew members, Commander Ron Schaeffer."* The reporter took a dramatic pause and tried to look as earnest as possible. *"His wife and children were here today when the tragedy occurred."*

Mike set down his bus tray and wearily looked up at the television set. He watched as footage that had been shot earlier in the day began to play.

The handheld camera zoomed in to focus on a grief-stricken Rebekah Schaeffer. She clutched her daughters as she tried to make her way through a sea of reporters. They were shouting questions and pushing microphones in her face. Sheriff Smitty was by her side, trying to open a path for her to gain entry into her home.

"Get back . . . Get back . . . Please!" Smitty pleaded. "No!

She has nothing to say right now. I said to get back! C'mon! Show a little decency!"

Reporters pushed and shoved as they jockeyed for the best angle. In all the mayhem, little Chloe was beginning to cry. Rebekah kept her head down and tried to fish the house keys out of her purse. But before they could get into the house, a reporter shoved a microphone in Rebekah's face again and shouted, "Mrs. Schaeffer! Mrs. Schaeffer! What were you thinking when you watched the shuttle explode?"

Smitty lunged for the reporter, but before Mike could see what happened next, the television blinked off.

"That's enough of that!" Grandma Fowler looked at Mike and shook her head. "Disgusting."

As Mike went back to his work, the front door suddenly burst open. Ben, Winnie, and Spence rushed in, visibly excited.

"Mike! Guess what! Guess what!" Ben yelled. All three kids ran over to where Mike was working. "Smitty wants to see us at his office tomorrow morning. And guess why!"

"It has to do with Buchanan and the stolen goods we recovered!" Winnie couldn't help but spill some of the beans.

Mike looked up from his work. The expression on his face was both tired and disheartened. "I'm kinda busy right now, guys."

"But, Mike!" Ben was practically dancing with joy. "We're gonna be rich! Filthy rich!"

"Well, I wouldn't say 'rich,'" Spence clarified. "But it turns out that there was a reward being offered on some of the items we recovered."

"Bet you're not too busy now." Ben rubbed his hands together, obviously thinking of all the comic books and candy he would buy.

"Maybe we should meet tomorrow before we go see Smitty," Winnie suggested. "What time sounds good, Mike?"

Mike began clearing the table again. "I can't make it."

"Oh, I get it." Ben assumed Mike was teasing. "Why pick up a huge reward when you can make a few quarters here at the diner, right?"

"Listen, I appreciate that you delivered the message. But, like I said, I'm a little busy right now. Okay?" Mike pushed his way past them.

"Okaaay . . ." Spence said with a puzzled look on his face. "I wonder what's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Winnie said with a shrug.

Mike could still hear Spence and the others, but he kept working.

Ben suddenly brightened. "Hey! Do you guys feel like a malt? Let's start spending some of our reward money."

"We haven't got it yet," Spence reminded him as they sat down at a table.

At the other end of the diner, Smitty entered, looking beat up by the day's events. He waved a weary "hello" to Pop and Gail, who were at the cash register.

"Smitty!" Gail waved him over to join them. "We just watched what happened at Rebekah's house. I'm so sorry."

"Well, that's one of the reasons I dropped by." Smitty removed his cowboy hat and sat down on a stool at the counter. "As you can imagine, Rebekah and the girls are having a tough go of it right now. And I was thinking—it would sure be nice if you all could come alongside them and offer whatever support they might need." Smitty paused and awkwardly studied the brim of his hat. "Since your family has, well, you know . . . been through something similar."

Gail didn't hesitate. "Of course we will, Smitty. Since tomorrow's Sunday, I was planning to drop off some breakfast at Rebekah's house and see if she wanted to go to church."

"That's perfect. I really appreciate it." Smitty got up and headed to his usual booth. "Gail, can you set me up with whatever's on special tonight?"

"One chicken-fried steak coming up!"

Gail walked back to the kitchen and set the order on the ledge of the pass-thru window. Mike was nearby, making a fresh pot of coffee.

"Mike, did you hear what Smitty said?" his mother asked.

"Yeah."

"Why don't you come with me tomorrow morning?"

Perhaps you could talk to Rachel. You know, she looks up to you.”

“I don’t think so, Mom.”

“C’mon, Mike. I think it might really help the girls if you —”

“What would I say?” he interrupted.

“Well, I think,” Gail started to respond.

“I mean, really. What could I possibly say that would make them feel better? Or give them any hope?” Mike let the question hang in the air for a moment before leaving to resume his duties.

He’d seen the deep look of concern on his mom’s face, but he kept moving. He approached Smitty’s booth and set a cup of coffee down in front of him.

“Thanks, Mike. I—” Smitty’s police walkie-talkie suddenly sounded its alert tones, followed by the voice of Arlene.

“Sheriff Smitty, come in.”

“Go ahead, Arlene,” Smitty responded.

“Smitty, I just got a call from the Wilsons. You know, that hippie couple that lives out near Indian Springs?”

“I know who they are. What’s the problem?”

“Well, Skye said that—get this—a spaceship landed in their front yard.”

“Come again, Arlene. Did you say ‘spaceship’?”

“Yep. That’s what she claims. She wanted you to come out there right away. She also said something about aliens. And she wanted me to warn you that they were the acid-for-blood kind. What do you make of that, Smitty?”

Smitty pushed the cup of coffee away and put on his cowboy hat. “Oh, who knows what kinds of herbs those two have mixed together this time. I’m on my way out there, Arlene. Smitty out.”

Smitty threw a couple of dollars onto the table and turned to Mike. “Tell your mom to put a hold on that special. This sounds like it might take a while.”

Mike had heard the radio call, and he figured that Winnie, Ben, and Spence had overheard some of it too from their nearby table. Once Smitty had exited the diner, they

approached him.

“Mike, is this a case right up our alley or what?” Winnie exclaimed.

“Spaceships? Aliens? I don’t know,” Spence said skeptically.

“But if it is the real thing, this could be HUGE! This calls for an emergency meeting.” Ben nudged Mike in the ribs with his elbow. “Right, Mike?”

“Like I said, I’m busy!” Mike turned his back to them and returned to his work.

“What is wrong with you, Mike?” Winnie asked. “Are you playing some kind of game or just trying to be rude on purpose?”

Mike spun around to face them. “Look, I don’t know how much clearer I can make this: Leave me alone!”

The words rang out louder than Mike had intended.

At the far end of the counter, Pop looked up from his newspaper. He watched as Mike disappeared into the back kitchen, leaving his friends standing in the middle of the room, with hurt and bewildered expressions on their faces.

When Pop entered the kitchen, he found Mike busy washing dishes. Pop picked up a dish towel and joined him at the sink.

“Got a feeling I know what you’re going through.” Pop took a clean dish out of Mike’s hand and started drying it. “Been there more times than I care to admit.”

Mike made no reply and continued to wash the plates.

“It’s okay,” Pop assured him. “You don’t have to talk right now if you don’t want to.”

They both stood there, silently working for several minutes.

Mike finally looked up. Pop could now see that his grandson was fighting to control his emotions.

“Why’d He do it, Pop?” Mike asked.

“Who?” Pop wondered.

“God. Why does He sometimes take dads away from their families?”

Pop paused and looked Mike in the eyes. “I—I don’t know,

Mike. I honestly don't know."

"Me neither," Mike said softly.

"But I can tell you what I *do* know," Pop continued. "God is holy. That means He's great and completely good. There is no evil in Him. In the book of Lamentations, it says that God does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow."

Mike stared down into the dishwater, listening.

"I also know that we can absolutely trust God because He loves us," Pop said. "And we can take whatever trouble we're facing to Him in prayer because He wants to hear from us. He's our loving, heavenly Father."

"I pray to God every day, Pop." A sad expression came over Mike's face. "But He won't answer."

"Well, Mike, sometimes it just takes time for us to see—"

"I've given Him time!" Mike's sadness had turned to anger. "But it's been years!"

A plate slipped from Mike's hands and crashed to the floor. Instinctively, he tried to grab it but winced as a sharp edge cut his finger.

"Ooh! Let me see that, Mike." Pop examined Mike's hand. "Yeah, you cut yourself pretty good."

"Aw, it doesn't hurt much," Mike said.

"We'd best wash it and get a bandage on there, so it doesn't get infected." Pop grabbed a nearby first-aid kit. "Now let me see that finger again. And hold still."

Pop began to bandage Mike's finger. He glanced up and saw tears welling up in Mike's eyes. "Am I hurting you?" Pop asked.

"No," Mike assured him. "It's just that—I'm not asking God for much. Just an answer! All I want to know—one way or the other—is if my dad is still alive. Pop, why can't God at least tell me that much?"

Pop had tears in his own eyes as well. "Mike, you're not the only one who lost a loved one when that fighter jet went down. He was your dad . . . but he was *my* son." Pop quickly wiped his eyes and then went back to treating Mike's finger. "But I get through it. And do you know how?"

Mike shook his head no.

“I focus on what I know is true. Second Corinthians 5:7 tells us that ‘we walk by faith, not by sight.’ I don’t pretend to know what God is doing all the time. But I do know that I’m supposed to trust Him. Even when it doesn’t make any sense. That’s called faith. And so—even though it’s not always easy—that’s what I try to do. Day by day. Hour by hour. One step at a time. And as much as it hurts, Mike, that’s what you’ve got to do too.” Pop finished wrapping the finger and ruffled the boy’s hair. “There you go. Change that bandage once more tomorrow and it should heal nicely.”

Mike looked up at his grandfather and wearily smiled. “I will, Pop.”

Chapter 6

SHERIFF SMITTY'S TRUCK still sported the angry scrape down its side where it had been sideswiped. Smitty had managed to temporarily reattach the door so he could drive the truck. He planned to take it to the collision repair shop after things in town calmed down. Smitty peered intently out the windshield as he tried to quickly—yet safely—navigate the dark, deserted dirt road ahead. He knew it was his duty to respond to 911 calls as fast as he possibly could—even if they sounded crazy; what police call a “5150.”

Smitty had never had trouble with the Wilsons before. But aliens? Flying saucers? It sure sounded crazy.

It was hard for Smitty to gauge exactly how far he had driven. In the desert, the landscape could all begin to look the same—especially in the dark. But he figured he should be nearing Indian Springs and the Wilsons' trailer home any time now. Unless he had somehow already gone past it.

Smitty pulled his truck over to the side of the road and examined a topographic map of the area. The map indicated that Lonesome Butte should be directly east of his current position. He doubted he would be able to see the butte in the dark, but he looked out the window anyway. Outside the window, a greenish fog was rolling in around the truck.

“What in the blue blazes?” Smitty said. “What’s fog doing out here?”

Fog wasn't completely unheard of in the Southwest desert. Sometimes it would appear in the winter months when the air was cool. But those occurrences were rare, and the fog never grew very dense. It was now late spring, and the weather was already hot. It would be impossible for fog to be here now.

Without turning off the ignition, Smitty stepped out of the truck to investigate. He immediately noticed a strange odor in the air. A smell he couldn't quite place. The fog continued to

thicken. Even with the headlights of his truck on, Smitty could only see about seven yards ahead.

Smitty hadn't seen fog this thick since he had been in the Marines. Back in 1969, Smitty, and the platoon he led, were fighting in the northern mountain region of Vietnam. For almost an entire week, the fog had become particularly thick. They tried to patrol the mountain trails, but most of the time they couldn't see where they were going. Several times they stumbled across enemy Vietcong guerrilla soldiers—only becoming aware of their existence when it was too late. The sudden panic, gunfire, and bloodshed were horrific memories he had tried to forget.

Smitty was about to climb back into his truck when he saw something dart through the headlight beams of his truck. He didn't get a good look at what it was—but it appeared to be a man.

"Hey! Who's there?" Smitty called.

There was no answer.

Smitty reached into his truck and turned off the ignition. With the engine off, his ears were able to make out what sounded like nearby voices, whispering back and forth.

"Lyle? Skye Wilson?" Smitty grabbed the flashlight he kept inside the truck and pointed its beam to where he last heard the whispers. The fog was so thick that the flashlight beam almost made things worse.

"This is Sheriff Theodore Smitty of the county sheriff's department," Smitty called into the fog. "Identify yourself!"

Once again, there was no response.

Smitty slowly crept forward through the thick mist. He panned the flashlight back and forth, not sure of who or what he would find. One thing he was sure of: He wasn't alone.

Smitty stood silently, listening for almost an entire minute before he decided it would be best to return to his vehicle. The fog was so thick he could barely make out the truck's headlights. But as he moved forward, he suddenly saw the silhouette of a figure move between himself and the truck.

"Hey you! Stop!" Smitty stumbled forward. The figure disappeared again, but Smitty could hear running feet so he

chased after the noise. He was running almost completely blind, but it seemed that he was catching up to whatever was in front of him. With each step he grew closer until he could just make out the shape of a figure running in front of him. Smitty lunged forward, grabbed the figure by the shoulder, and spun it around.

Smitty's jaw dropped open in disbelief. The skinny man he had captured was wearing a conical Asian rice hat. Ammo belts crisscrossed his khaki shirt. A rifle was slung over his shoulder. Smitty knew immediately what he was—a Vietcong guerrilla soldier.

Smitty was in such shock that he didn't try to stop the man as he pulled away and disappeared back into the fog.

None of it made any sense. The fog, the enemy soldier . . . This was the good ol' USA, not Vietnam. The war had been over for twenty years.

Smitty thought that maybe he could regain his bearings if he returned to his truck. He could still just barely make out the headlights and headed in that direction.

The man he ran into must've alerted others because Smitty could hear more footsteps and multiple angry voices. Their dialect was unmistakably Vietnamese. The sound of their voices and footsteps came from all directions, closing in on Smitty's position.

Smitty reached his truck and tried to carefully open the door without making a sound. But the moment he unlatched the door, the "key-in-ignition" warning chimed loudly. As if in response, a volley of shots rang out. The truck's windshield and side mirror exploded in a hail of gunfire. In one quick move, Smitty dove away from the truck, pulled his service revolver, and rolled to a prone defensive position.

"I'm a police officer!" Smitty called. "Put down your weapons! I don't want to hurt anybody!"

All was quiet for a few moments. Then Smitty heard voices whispering again and the metallic "ping" of a pin being pulled. A grenade bounced out of the fog and landed only a few feet away. Knowing he had only seconds to escape, Smitty jumped to his feet and began to run.



Grace Church of Ambrosia sat right on the edge of the city limits. The white-steepled building could hold up to three hundred people. This Sunday morning it was almost entirely full.

The Fowlers were seated near the front, next to the Schaeffers. Winnie, Ben, and Spence were in attendance with their families as well.

"I see many new faces here this morning," Pastor Tom Givens said as he looked up from his sermon notes and studied the congregation before him. "I'm sure many of you came here looking to make sense of yesterday's tragedy."

Several people silently nodded in agreement from their pews.

"Isaiah 55:8-9 reads, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Pastor Givens continued, "God works in mysterious ways that man cannot understand. We will only have a clear picture of His perfect reasoning when we finally meet Him face-to-face. Until then, we are told not to lean on our own understanding, but to simply trust our loving, heavenly Father. And if we are obedient in this, then the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds."

Outside sunlight came across Pastor Givens as the doors to the church creaked open.

"Please come in and find a seat," Pastor Givens said, straining to see who it was. "We can make room."

There was an audible gasp from the back of the church. People near the front turned around to see what the fuss was all about.

At the back of the church stood Sheriff Smitty. Pale and drenched in sweat, he was a mere ghost of himself. His clothes were torn and there were visible scratches all over his skin. He swayed back and forth as if he could barely keep himself upright.

“Sheriff Smitty?” Pastor Givens could see that something was wrong. “Could someone please give him a hand?”

Before anyone could reach him, Smitty took a weak, wobbly step forward, tried to mouth some words, and collapsed in the aisle.

Chapter 7

WHEN DOCTOR BILL BENSON first came to live in Ambrosia, people were a little wary. They wondered why a middle-aged, big-city doctor would want to move his practice to such a small town. Some suggested that perhaps he was running away from malpractice suits or some such thing. It didn't help that he walked a little funny—stiff-legged—like perhaps he wore leg braces.

But things changed once people got to know him. They learned that he had come to the arid desert because of a rare medical condition. They also discovered that he was a brilliant physician and that Ambrosia had lucked out when he chose to live and practice medicine in their small town.

Doctor Benson had been in the church audience when Smitty collapsed. He was by his side within seconds. Doc had already listened to Smitty's heart and taken his blood pressure by the time the ambulance arrived. He instructed the EMTs to start an immediate IV drip to get some fluids into Smitty.

As the EMTs started loading the still-unconscious sheriff into the back of the ambulance, Pop and Mike approached Doctor Benson.

"How is he, Doc?" Pop asked.

"Stable, for the time being. We'll know more when we get him to the hospital."

"What happened to him?" Mike asked.

"Wish I knew. He's showing all the classic signs of heatstroke, dehydration, and shock." Doc Benson pointed to Smitty's boots. "And I'd bet my grandmother's dentures that once we take those boots off, we'll find that his feet are covered with blisters."

"His feet?" Mike asked. "What do you mean?"

"Look at his clothes. See the scratches on his arms and face? His vitals are that of a man pushed to the point of utter

exhaustion.” Doc shrugged. “My guess is that he got lost, panicked, and has been running across the desert all night. He came to this church because it was the first place where he could find help.”

“Smitty knows this desert like the back of his hand,” Pop said. “And even if he did get lost, he would never panic.”

“Well, something got to him.”

“Look!” Mike pointed to Smitty. “He’s trying to say something.”

Smitty was momentarily conscious. He weakly mouthed Pop’s name.

“What, Smitty? What are you trying to say?” Pop leaned down, put his ear next to Smitty’s mouth, and listened for several moments.

“Excuse me,” a paramedic interrupted. “We’ve got to get this man to the hospital.”

“Of course.” Pop stepped back out of the way, with a puzzled look on his face.

“What did he say?” Doc Benson asked.

“Doesn’t make any sense.” Pop turned to the doctor. “He said he was back.”

“Back? From where?” Doc’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“That’s just it. He said he went back to . . . Vietnam!”



As the ambulance drove off, the crowd of onlookers started to disperse. Mike turned to find Winnie, Ben, and Spence standing a few yards away.

“Well, what do you three think you’re doing?” Mike asked.

“Sorry, Mike,” Ben apologized.

“We’re not trying to bug you or anything,” Winnie explained.

“Yeah, we were just concerned about Smitty,” Spence added.

“What’re you doing standing around here,” Mike smiled at them, “when we’ve got a case we should be working on? C’mon!”

Mike ran off, leading the way like usual, and beckoned for his friends to follow.

“Looks like the old Mike is back!” Winnie exclaimed.



Pop’s old B-17, the *Lady Liberty*, was the perfect clubhouse for the Last Chance Detectives. Pop had run power out from the diner so that the kids could have lights at night. Spence had converted the aircraft’s bomb bay into a small lab and darkroom. Mike had upgraded the radio compartment into a communications center that included a shortwave radio, phone, and computer.

Today the four detectives gathered around a card table. Mike, Winnie, and Spence sat on folding chairs. Ben reclined in a nearby hammock, reading a comic book.

“All right, guys, let’s call this meeting to order,” Mike said.

“Ben, would you put that comic book down for a minute?” Winnie asked.

“It’s called a ‘graphic novel,’” Ben corrected her.

“Uh-huh, for the literary challenged,” Winnie shot back.

“That’s right, for the liter—” Ben paused. “Wait. What?”

“Yep. Things are back to normal,” Spence noted. He pulled a wristwatch out of his pocket and handed it to Mike. “Oh, before I forget—I haven’t finished modifying your watch yet, but see if you like how mine works.”

“You’re fixing his watch?” Ben complained. “What about my video game cartridge?”

“Sorry, Ben. This took precedence.”

“But what could possibly be more important than saving a princess from the evil—”

“Guys,” Mike interrupted. “We need to focus on the case.”

“Sorry,” Ben said sheepishly.

Winnie began first. “Well, I for one think we can rule out Smitty being zapped back to Vietnam.”

“I agree. But on the other hand, we’ve got to consider that he was a veteran of that war,” Spence reminded her. “From what I’ve read, flashbacks are not all that uncommon.”

“Flashbacks? *Smitty*?” Mike shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“But of all the explanations, it does make the most sense,” Winnie said.

“So, we’re saying that *Smitty* either came into contact with something bad enough to trigger a flashback. Or . . .” Mike paused to consider the alternatives. “Or something else happened that—well, you all saw how he looked! Either way, we’re talking about something so horrible it would put a grown man into a complete state of shock.”

“Whoa!” Ben exclaimed. “But what?”

The four kids sat in silence, each searching for the solution to the puzzle.

“Maybe we should make a list,” Winnie finally suggested. “What is the worst possible thing each of us can think of? What’s your worst fear?”

While Winnie waited for one of the boys to begin, she pulled out her sketch pad and started doodling. A few minutes went by before she realized no one had said anything. Apparently, the guys were afraid they might be made fun of.

“Fine. I’ll go first,” Winnie said. “I admit that I don’t like spiders.”

She held up her notebook to reveal a sketch of a black spider. Winnie was a gifted artist. The detailed spider looked angular and threatening.

Ben started laughing. “Ha! Spiders? Right! Here comes big ol’ Sheriff *Smitty* running back to town.” Ben changed his voice to a high falsetto. “Oh! Help me! A little insect is after me!”

Mike and Spence laughed.

“Very funny, comic boy,” Winnie said dryly. “Okay. Now let’s hear why you still sleep with a nightlight.”

“How did you know that I—” Ben caught himself mid-sentence. “You want to know what I’m afraid of? All right, I’ll tell you. I’m not ashamed. ’Cause, unlike spiders, this really does give a lot of people the willies. In fact, the very mention of this terrifying subject is enough to strike fear into the very heart of most mere mortals. It’s enough to utterly paralyze the

bravest of—”

“Would you just say it?” Winnie shouted.

“Two words.” Ben dramatically leaned forward.

“Clownophobia!”

“That’s actually one word,” Spence corrected.

“Clowns?” Winnie couldn’t believe her own ears. “You’re afraid of *clowns*?”

“Lots of people are!” Ben replied defensively.

“Ben’s afraid of Bozo!” Winnie mocked him in a singsongy voice. “Ben’s afraid of Bozo!”

“Want me to prove it?” Ben asked, trying to ignore her.

“All right! Who’s Batman’s archenemy? Huh?”

“The Joker *is* a clown,” Mike admitted.

“And . . . and . . .” Ben tried to think of another example.

“Well, just look what clowns did to Dumbo’s mom!”

“I never have forgiven them for that,” Spence agreed.

“I know! And check out this comi—uh, graphic novel.”

Ben held up his comic book. On the cover, the picture looked like it was curtains for the Action Rangers as they tried to dodge the plasma gun of an evil, grinning, galactic clown. “See this guy? That’s Clarence the Cosmic Clown. You can’t tell me he’s not scary!”

“He’s not scary,” Winnie said with a yawn.

“You know, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Mike said. “Let’s get back to Smitty. Last night I had a lot on my mind, but weren’t you guys trying to talk to me about that weird radio call Smitty got?”

“Yeah, we didn’t hear the whole thing, but it sounded like the Wilsons had seen some sort of spaceship,” Spence explained. “It’s a goofy story, but that’s where Smitty was headed before he freaked out.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Mike said. “Who knows where the Wilsons live?”

“I do,” Winnie said. “To get to their place you have to travel across American Indian land. So they had to get permission from our tribal council. They live in a trailer home, just this side of the old military base.”

“What?” Ben’s eyes grew large.

“Are you sure, Winnie?” Mike asked. “That’s over twenty-five miles from where Smitty showed up at the church. He would have had to have run over—”

Ben suddenly slammed his hands down on the table. “Hold it! Hold everything! I think I just figured this whole thing out.”

Winnie rolled her eyes. “Oh, here we go . . .”

“No, listen!” Ben made sure he had everyone’s complete attention. “Maybe *both* stories—the aliens *and* Smitty going back to Vietnam—maybe all of it’s true!”

“Honestly?” Mike shook his head. “I’m having a hard time believing either story.”

“And statistically speaking,” Spence pointed out, “the odds of even one of the stories being true—let alone both—are virtually impossible.”

“That’s where you’re wrong! Every bit of it is possible,” Ben paused for dramatic effect, “in the ‘Forbidden Zone!’”

“C’mon, Ben. Quit fooling around,” Winnie said.

“Winnie, I’m serious! This could explain everything!”

Spence looked deep in thought. “It is an interesting premise.”

“What?” Winnie thought Spence must be joking. “Spence, don’t encourage him.”

“See?” Ben turned to Mike. “Mike, you know what I’m talking about, right?”

“I don’t think so,” Mike said with a shrug. “The Forbidden Zone just sounds like an old TV show.”

“C’mon! The Forbidden Zone!” Ben repeated. “It’s what everyone used to call the old military base. It got that name because it was off-limits and so many weird things happened out there. People said that even from town, you could see strange lights and hear bizarre sounds. My older brother and his friends say it was the original Area 51!”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re buying any of this, Spence,” Winnie pleaded.

Spence rubbed his chin in thought. “Well, historically speaking, the Air Force denied the old military base even existed up until the late 1970s. That was when they

mothballed the whole operation,” Spence explained. “Now they openly admit that it was a place of top-secret, high-technology experimentation.”

“But what does that have to do with spaceships? Or Vietnam?” Mike asked.

“Don’t you see? There’s only one possible explanation for all this stuff.” Ben looked at Mike intently. “Someone must have reopened the Philadelphia Experiment!”

“I’m not sure *what* you’re talking about, Ben.” Mike stood up from the table. “But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to go out and take a look.”

Chapter 8

POP FOWLER WAS ALWAYS fixing up old vehicles. Whether it was a plane or a car—if it had an engine, Pop could get it running like new. A year earlier, Pop had repaired an old Cessna aircraft for a client and was paid off with four quad runners in return. Not knowing what to do with them at first, Pop decided to branch out and add a side rental business to the Last Chance Gas and Diner.

He rented the quad runners to sightseers who wanted to explore the desert. But after a few months of tourists getting lost, hurt, and crashing into cacti, Pop realized he had made a miscalculation and closed the rental business for good. He now let Mike and his friends use the quad runners—as long as they promised to be careful.

At their meeting earlier that day, the four detectives had decided to ride the quad runners out to the old, abandoned military base and see if they could dig up any clues.

They'd been driving for an hour when Mike pulled over to the side of the dusty road to take a rest.

"What's wrong?" Winnie stopped her quad runner beside Mike.

"I just want to make sure we don't take a wrong turn." Mike pulled a topographic map out of his daypack and began examining it. "My guess is that if we'd taken a left back there, we would've come to Smitty's truck and the Wilsons' place. But as long as we stay to the right, we should eventually find an old paved road that leads to the military base."

"The Forbidden Zone," Ben corrected.

Spence took a drink from his canteen and peered over at Mike's map. "You know, I recently read in his biography that Albert Einstein once visited the Forbidden Zone. That's probably what started the rumor that the military was using his theory of relativity as a basis for time-travel

experimentation.”

“Time travel?” Mike looked up from the map.

“Yeah,” Ben said as he removed his helmet. His wavy hair was dripping with sweat. “They figured out a way to open some sort of cosmic wormhole.”

“The urban legend is that a battleship called the *Philadelphia* was all but lost in just such an experiment,” Spence explained. “They were trying to find a way to make ships invisible on radar. The story goes that scientists, using huge magnets and incredible amounts of electricity, eventually succeeded. The *Philadelphia* disappeared. Not just on radar—the ship was literally no longer there. Apparently, they had opened some kind of interdimensional wormhole into another time and space. Now they had a new problem: getting the *Philadelphia* back.” Spence stopped mid-story to take another sip from his canteen.

“Well,” he continued, “the scientists worked frantically and eventually got the battleship to reappear. But something had gone horribly wrong. Somehow the ship had gotten all jumbled up. Pieces of the top decks were down below. Cabin rooms were backward. And witnesses claimed that the few surviving sailors were actually fused into the metal deck.”

“Ew!” Winnie grimaced. “Gross!”

“I’m just telling you what I heard.” Spence shrugged. “The project was supposedly abandoned because the new technology couldn’t be controlled. Some say a few of the wormholes never did fully close.”

“Which explains all those missing planes and ships you hear about in the Bermuda Triangle,” Ben added.

“But that’s way out in the Atlantic Ocean,” Winnie said. “That’s thousands of miles away. And last I checked, there aren’t a lot of battleships around here.”

“But somewhere around here is the base where they developed *that* technology,” Ben said. “And if their experiments accidentally left some of those dimensional doorways open—well, that could explain what happened to both the Wilsons *and* Smitty!”

Mike and Winnie had been trying their best to keep

straight faces. But it all sounded so bizarre that they finally burst out laughing. Spence couldn't help but join them.

"C'mon, Ben!" Mike laughed. "Even for you, that's pretty far out there."

"Go ahead and laugh," Ben replied. "But have you guys got a better explanation?"

"Well, no," Mike admitted. "But interdimensional *wormholes*?"

"Okay." Ben was tired of not being taken seriously. "How much do you want to bet that when we find that base, it's fully operational and swarming with guards?"

"After all these years?" Winnie asked doubtfully. "Ben, no one's gonna be out in the middle of nowhere guarding an old, abandoned pile of junk!"



It took the kids another half hour to find the outer perimeter of the old military base. Rusty No Trespassing signs hung limply from the chain-link fence. The road that had once been paved was now cracked and overgrown with brown weeds. Riding their quad runners, the kids approached the main gate and were shocked to discover two armed military guards blocking their entry.

"You are trespassing on government property," one of the guards sternly warned. "Please leave immediately—going back the way you came!"

"Has the base reopened?" Winnie asked.

"I'll only warn you one more time!" the guard shouted. "You are on government property! Leave immediately or you will be arrested!"

The kids looked at Ben in disbelief. For once, he'd been right. Ben smiled back at them smugly.



Smitty lay in a hospital bed, dressed in a light blue gown. Clear tubes ran from an IV bag to his arm. He was fully awake

and not happy to be there.

"What's all this for?" he gruffly asked a nurse. "Get my clothes. I need to get outta here."

"Sheriff, please don't struggle," the nurse warned. "You'll only make things worse."

"Things are going to get a whole lot worse if I don't get these tubes out of my arm!"

Doc Benson walked stiffly into the hospital room, followed by Pop Fowler.

"Maybe he'll listen to you, Pop," Doc Benson said. "A man in his condition needs a lot of rest."

"Hey, Smitty," Pop said as he approached the side of the bed.

"Pop!" Smitty reached out and grabbed Pop's sleeve. "Pop, you've got to get me out of here. I'm doing much better now!"

"Just take it easy," Pop said. "You're in good hands. There's no rush—"

"But we're running out of time," Smitty interrupted. "We've got to stop them before it's too late!"

"Who, Smitty? *Who* do we have to stop?"

"The Vietcong! The Vietcong are invading!"

Pop gently smiled. "Okay, Smitty. Okay."

Smitty could see the doubt in Pop's eyes. "I know it sounds crazy. But you've got to believe me!"

"Smitty, I know *you* believe it. And you've never lied to me." Pop patted Smitty's shoulder as he reassured him. "Now, get some rest."

Pop and Doc Benson exited the room. Once in the hallway, Pop asked quietly, "What do you make of that, Doc?"

"I'm not sure," Doc admitted. "But I've got two other patients just like him in the next room. You know the Wilsons. They've got the same dilated pupils. The same paranoia."

"Did they see an invading army, too?" Pop asked half joking.

"Of course not," Doc assured him.

"Well, that's a relief."

"They saw aliens."



With Mike in the lead, the four kids drove their quad runners back the way they came. After a quarter of a mile, Mike veered off the road and pulled to a stop at the chain-link fence that made up the perimeter of the old military base. He got off his bike and began to closely examine the barrier. Barbed wire ran across the top, and even though the fence was old, there were no breaks in the chain link.

“Mike, what are you doing?” Winnie called.

Mike bent down and examined the bottom of the fence. “Looks like some kind of critter dug his way under here.” Mike pulled at the bottom of the fence and was able to create an opening just big enough for a person to slip under. “Yeah! This will work!”

“Wait a minute,” Spence said. “I thought we all agreed that the Last Chance Detectives would never break the law.”

“I’m not gonna break the law.” Mike slid his daypack under the fence. “Would one of you guys hold this open so I can slide under?”

“But back at the main gate—you heard what the soldiers said!” Spence reminded him.

“Those were *not* real soldiers.”

“They sure looked real to me,” Ben said.

“When your dad’s in the Air Force, you learn a thing or two about military uniforms.” Mike began to crawl under the fence. “A real soldier would never wear the bars on his uniform upside down. One of them did. And the other guy had mismatched rank identification as well. No, those ‘soldiers’ were as phony as a three-dollar bill.”

Now on the other side of the fence, Mike got to his feet and slung his daypack onto his back.

“But shouldn’t we call the sheriff?” Ben asked nervously.

“Smitty’s in the hospital,” Mike reminded him.

“How about his deputy then?” Ben suggested.

“He’s got his hands full babysitting the shuttle investigation and the media. It would take him a week before he finally got around to looking into this.” Mike looked down

at his watch. "All I need is just ten to fifteen minutes to have a look around."

"Shouldn't we go with you?" Winnie asked.

"No. One person stands less of a chance of being seen. Besides, I might need someone to go get help." Mike gestured to their walkie-talkies. "Just monitor your radio, and I'll let you know what I find."

"Be careful, Mike!" Winnie said.

"I will," Mike said as he disappeared into the bushes.

Chapter 9

MIKE PUSHED HIS WAY THROUGH a thick stand of chaparral brush before he discovered that the desert landscape opened up to miles of open dunes. He climbed to the top of a sandy ridge and cautiously peered over the edge. From his prone position, he could see a large, flat, dry lake bed down below. In the middle of the basin, about a quarter of a mile away, was the military base Mike and his friends had been searching for.

Moving fast, he pulled a pair of binoculars out of his daypack and began studying the military base below.

Several large landing strips surrounded a large complex of two-story industrial buildings. Timeworn rocket-testing towers and airplane hangars dotted the landscape.

At first glance the base still looked abandoned, but on closer inspection Mike saw some movement. A greenish smoke was drifting out of the ventilation system that sat atop the main three-story building. Wind had picked up the smoke and pushed it in his direction. It smelled funny and slightly burned his nose.

Mike looked up at the sky and didn't like what he saw. Dark, threatening thunderclouds were quickly rolling in across the horizon. The last thing he needed was to face a flash flood in an area he was unfamiliar with.

Mike continued to pan the buildings with his binoculars. On closer inspection, he discovered several parked Humvees hidden from view under a camouflage overhang. He also spotted a jeep that was slowly cruising between buildings. Somebody had definitely set up some sort of operation down there.

Mike pulled the walkie-talkie out of his daypack and checked the sky overhead. The clouds had moved in faster than he had expected. They darkened the sky and slowly circled the military base.

“Desert Eagle One to Desert Eagle Two,” Mike said into his walkie-talkie.

“Go ahead, Eagle One,” Winnie answered.

“I made it!” Mike exclaimed.

“What do you see?” Winnie asked.

Mike held the binoculars back up to his eyes. “Buildings, hangars, runways . . . Don’t see a lot of movement, but I did see someone driving a jeep. Hold on a minute—I can see somebody now!”

Mike watched as a man dressed in camouflage fatigues opened the door to a large hangar. The man quickly entered and closed the large door behind him. Mike had just enough time to make out belted tire treads and the muzzle of a huge cannon. They were hiding a tank in that hangar!

“Whoa!” Mike said into his walkie-talkie. “They’ve got some heavy-duty firepower down there!”

“Come again, Desert Eagle, you’re breaking up,” Winnie requested.

The storm clouds had grown considerably. Wind kicked up dust and tugged at Mike’s hair and clothes.

“I said they’ve got firepower!” Mike yelled over the howling wind. “I’m pretty sure it’s some kind of tank!”

A loud clap of thunder startled Mike. He looked up to see that the storm clouds above were now swirling faster than he thought possible. It looked like something out of one of those extreme-tornado shows on The Weather Channel. But instead of a twister forming, the swirling action caused the clouds to open—like the eye of a hurricane. And instead of blue sky on the other side of the clouds, Mike was startled to see utter blackness.

Fingers of lightning spider-webbed their way around the edges of the hole in the clouds as it grew ever larger. Mike’s eyes went wide in disbelief. Beyond the clouds he could see stars, planets—even the Milky Way. It was like looking through a window into the depths of outer space!



Winnie, Ben, and Spence hadn't heard from Mike in several minutes and were getting nervous.

"Eagle One, come in please," Winnie called into the walkie-talkie. "Are you there?"

There was no immediate response, but then:

"Do you guys see this? It's incredible!" Mike's voice sounded somewhat distorted. He was yelling and obviously very excited. *"Just look at it!"*

"What?" Winnie asked. "What do you see?"

"Up in the sky! It's huge!" Mike replied.

Mike's three friends looked up into the sky but saw nothing unusual.

"Eagle One, what's up in the sky?" Winnie asked.

"How can you not see this? It's unbelievable!" Mike was still shouting on his end of the walkie-talkie. *"I don't know how to explain it . . . but it can only be . . . a wormhole! Ben, it's your wormhole!"*

"What?" Winnie couldn't believe her ears.

Ben jumped up and danced around triumphantly. "I told you, Winnie! I told you! But—no! You wouldn't listen!"



Mike got to his feet and stared in astonishment at the vast cosmic expanse above him. Thunder rumbled and the clouds continued to circle the hole that now took up over a third of the sky. Stars and planets were clearer than Mike had ever seen them before. He wasn't afraid, just mesmerized by the wonder of it all.

Suddenly a small, fiery comet streaked out of the middle of the hole in the sky. Its trajectory sent it roaring directly over Mike. He watched as it disappeared over a nearby dune, and then felt the ground shake when it impacted.

Mike looked back up into the sky. The clouds were slowing, and his "window" into space was quickly closing. Mike ran forward to see what had hit on the other side of the dune.

"Guys! Guys!" Mike yelled into his walkie-talkie. "I think

it's safe now. The wormhole is closing. But something just flew out of it! I'm sure you must've heard it! I'm gonna go see what it is!"



Back at the quad runners, Mike's friends were growing more and more puzzled.

"Did you guys hear anything?" Spence asked. "I sure didn't."

"Me neither." Ben shrugged.

Winnie lifted the walkie-talkie to her mouth. "Eagle One, maybe you should wait until we can join you."

"Negative," Mike replied through a layer of static. *"It would be safer for you guys to stay where you are. Wait a minute! I can see something!"*

"Describe what you're seeing, Mike," Winnie said.

"I can see . . . It's . . ." Mike kept transmitting, but his voice was trailing off. *"No . . . It can't be. It—"*

The radio crackled and then went dead.

"What?" Ben exclaimed. "What did he see?"

"Eagle One?" Winnie shouted into the walkie-talkie.

There was no response.

"Eagle One! Please, come in!"



Mike could hear Winnie's pleas for him to answer, but he no longer cared. The walkie-talkie slipped from his fingers and fell into the sand. Mike stared in stunned silence at what lay before him. A deep furrow in the sand led to the final resting spot of a crashed jet airplane. But this was not just any jet. This was an F-16 fighter jet—the exact type of plane his dad had flown.

Mike ran forward, knowing that time was of the essence. Though there was little smoke coming from the jet's single engine, the smallest spark could ignite the highly flammable jet fuel at any moment. He had to see if there was a survivor

and get them both clear of the craft as fast as possible.

The nose of the F-16 was buried deep in the sand, but the cockpit was accessible. Mike grabbed the glass canopy and pulled as hard as he could. Air released with a sudden hiss, and the canopy hinged upward and back. The pilot was hunched over, groaning. As Mike began unbuckling the safety harnesses, the pilot leaned back and stared up at him.

“Mike!” a weak but familiar voice said.

“Dad?” Mike gasped.

Chapter 10

WINNIE, BEN, AND SPENCE huddled around the walkie-talkie, listening intently for any word from Mike.

“It isn’t like Mike to not answer us,” Spence said.

“What could’ve happened to him?” Ben asked.

“Eagle One, come in!” Winnie continued to try to get Mike to respond. “Eagle One, are you there? Mike?”

Ben paced back and forth, wringing his hands. “You guys don’t think he got sucked up into space, do you?”

“That’s not helping, Ben!” Winnie was running out of patience. “In fact, planting stupid ideas like that in our heads is only making things worse.”

“Hey, you’re the one who didn’t believe in wormholes up until a few minutes ago,” Ben pointed out.

“That’s it. I’ve waited long enough.” Winnie marched toward the fence and prepared to go under. “I’m gonna go find him.”

“But you heard what Mike said. We’re all supposed to stay put!” Ben reminded her.

“Ben’s right,” Spence said. “Let’s all just stay calm and give him a few more minutes.”

Winnie crossed her arms before letting out a deep sigh. “Okay, he’s got three minutes.”



Horizontal lines were etched deeply in the sand where Mike had dragged his father from the cockpit of the F-16 to the shade of a nearby Joshua tree. Mike cradled his father’s head in his lap and gave him a drink from his canteen.

John Fowler took a swig and coughed. “You’ve got to get me out of here, Mikey. I need a hospital.”

“I’m trying, Dad. I’m trying.” Mike looked down at his

dad's legs. It was obvious that they had been crushed in the plane crash. Mike was afraid to think about what internal injuries his father might be suffering from. The initial joy of finally being reunited with his dad was giving way to a new sinking fear that he might lose him again forever.

"Don't worry. I'm gonna get you out of here somehow," Mike assured him.

"I'm counting on you, Son! I'm—" Mike's dad was suddenly hit with a wave of excruciating pain. "Oh! It's worse than I thought."

"Hang on, Dad!" Mike fought to keep his composure. His dad's face was pale, and his breathing was becoming labored. Mike racked his brain as he tried to come up with a plan.

"Oh!" John Fowler groaned, his face etched with pain. "It hurts. . . ."

"I'm going to go get my radio," Mike explained. "My friends can help if I can just—"

"No!" John grabbed his son's arm. "There's no time. Don't leave me, Mike!"

"But if I don't go . . ." Mike fought back his tears.

"Mike." John Fowler struggled to keep his eyes open. His breathing was shallow, and his words began to falter. "I . . . love you . . . son."

"No, Dad!" Mike begged. "Please, no!"

"I—I only . . . wanted to see your mom . . . one more time."

"You will! You will see her!" Mike tried to put on a brave face, but he could see the terrible truth that his dad was dying.

John Fowler took one last deep breath, and then weakly uttered his final words. "If only . . . you had . . . looked for me harder."

"What?"

John Fowler's body went limp in Mike's arms.

"No! Dad! *Daaaad!*"



“Time’s up!” Winnie looked up from her watch. “Let’s go!”

“Okay.” Ben reluctantly followed her to the fence. “But I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.”

Winnie knelt by the spot in the fence where Mike had crawled under. “I’ll go first. Then I’ll hold open the fence on the other side so you guys can follow.”

“Ben, you better go last,” Spence suggested. “I think Winnie will need my help to hold it open for you.”

“That’s fine with me,” Ben said.

As the boys pulled back the chain-link fence to allow Winnie to climb under, a burst of static alerted them that the walkie-talkie was receiving a transmission.

“. . . *did my best* . . .” Mike’s voice was faint.

“It’s him!” Spence lifted his walkie-talkie. “Mike, are you okay?”

“*He’s dead . . . Oh, he’s dead . . .*”

Even though Spence couldn’t see Mike, he could tell his friend was crying. “Dead? Who’s dead?” Spence asked.

“*My dad,*” Mike sobbed. “*My dad is dead.*”

“Just stay where you are, Mike! We’re on our way!”



Back in Ambrosia, Pop was saying his goodbyes as he prepared to leave the hospital. “Well, Doc, let me know if there is anything else I can do.” Pop shook Doc Benson’s hand. “Or if you find out anything interesting from those blood tests.”

“As a matter of fact, Doctor”—a nurse approached Doc Benson and handed him a set of papers—“we just received those lab results you were waiting for.”

“On all three patients?” Doc asked.

“Yes. For Lyle and Skye Wilson, as well as Theodore Smitty.”

“Thank you.” Doc Benson’s brow furrowed as his eyes quickly scanned the results. “Hmmm . . .”

Pop waited anxiously until Doc had examined all three reports.

“That’s odd.” Doc looked up from the papers with a puzzled look on his face. “Very odd indeed!”

“What’s odd?” Pop asked.

“As I suspected, all three patients’ blood tests came back with matching results,” Doc said. “Normal, except they all share the very same anomaly.”

“What kind of an anomaly?”

“Smitty and the Wilsons must’ve all been exposed to the same thing because they all have traces of the same strange compound in their bloodstream,” Doc explained. “Our computers automatically checked the Periodic Table of Elements and—here’s what’s odd—they couldn’t classify one of the elements the compound was made of. We’ve never seen this one before.”

“What does this mean, Doc?” Pop asked.

“I don’t know.” Doc looked back down at the results and rubbed the back of his neck. “But since you say all three were in the same general area last night—well, I think it’s safe to say that something very strange is going on out there in the desert.”



In the shade of the Joshua tree, Mike slowly rocked his father’s lifeless body back and forth.

“I tried. I really tried, Dad,” Mike sobbed bitterly. “I did the best I could.”

Mike had been searching for his father for over half of his lifetime. He had sent letters to Washington, met with congressmen and foreign representatives. He had prayed and waited patiently for an answer for years with no response. And now to finally find—and once again lose—his father within a matter of a few minutes was too much to take.

“Mike!” a distant voice called.

Mike looked up and had to wipe his eyes to make sure he was seeing things correctly.

Thirty yards away, back in the F-16’s cockpit, Mike’s dad was alive and waving for him to come over.

Mike looked down and was astonished to find that his father's body had vanished from where it was lying just moments ago.

"Over here, Mike," his father beckoned from the F-16.

It didn't make sense, but Mike didn't care. His father was alive, and for the moment, that's all that mattered. He jumped to his feet and ran—half stumbling—back to the cockpit.

"You've got to get me out of here, Mikey. I need a hospital." His father spoke the words with the same vocal inflection and cadence as before.

Mike wondered if perhaps he was dreaming. "Are you . . . *real*?"

"Give me a hand," Mike's dad pleaded. "I'm counting on you!"

Mike realized that if he *was* asleep, then this wasn't a dream—it was a nightmare!

"Not again!" He unbuckled his dad's harness as he had before. "This is impossible!"

"Hurry!" Mike's dad insisted. "We're running out of time!"

"God, I can't do this," Mike prayed aloud as his fingers fumbled with the safety latches. "Not on my own."

"C'mon, Mike! Don't fail me again!"

"Please, God," Mike pleaded. "Please help me."

"No, Mike! You can't trust Him. Remember what He did to the little Schaeffer girls?"

Mike looked up at the face of his father in shock. "No! This doesn't make any sense."

"It's God who doesn't make sense!" John Fowler angrily shouted. "Look what He did to *our* family!"

Mike wasn't sure if what he was experiencing was real or all just a bad dream. The one thing he *was* sure of was that his dad—John Fowler—would never turn his back on God.

Mike wiped the tears from his eyes and stepped back away from the cockpit canopy.

"What are you doing?" shouted the man Mike had thought was his father. "You're wasting time!"

Mike looked up to the sky above. "My dad said that he might not always be there for me, but that You would, Lord!"

“Mike, it’s up to you! Not Him!” The figure in the cockpit strained to reach for Mike.

Mike dropped to his knees and closed his eyes. “Lord, help me walk—step by step—with that kind of faith.”

“No, Mike!” the voice of his father shouted.

“Into Your hands, I commit my father,” Mike cried out.

“Noooooooo!” The voice began to trail off and fade away.

“And into Your hands, I commit myself,” Mike finished. “Amen.”

When Mike finally opened his eyes, he discovered that he was all alone, kneeling on the empty sand dune. There was no sign of the F-16. Or anyone else ever having been there. The Joshua tree was still there, but the only tracks leading up to it and back were his own.

Mike got to his feet and studied the spot where his father had been seated in the F-16.

“None of it was real,” he said aloud, relieved that it had never happened. “That wasn’t my father.”

“Neither am I!” a muffled voice said from behind him.

Mike spun around and discovered a large soldier dressed in a camo uniform and wearing a gas mask. Before Mike could decide whether the man was real—or just another figment of his imagination—the soldier sprayed him in the face with an aerosol can.

Mike’s eyes rolled back, and all went dark.

Chapter 11

THE FIRST THING that Mike became conscious of was the sound of large, heavy footsteps approaching. Each step echoed louder and louder, making his head hurt. His eyes slowly opened, and he saw that he was in a dimly lit room. His head was still foggy, and he had a hard time focusing his eyes. A large, blurry white shape walked toward him and stopped. The figure knelt down as if to get a close look at him. Mike could hear a strange, mechanized breathing that reminded him of Darth Vader.

“Looks like you’re finally waking up,” a muffled voice said.

Mike fought with all his might to come to full consciousness. When the face in front of him finally did come into focus, Mike thought he must still be dreaming—because the face he saw was his own.

“Mike,” the muffled voice called his name. “Are you okay?”

Mike blinked several times and shook his head, trying to clear away the remaining cobwebs. His eyesight was now quickly regaining its normal clarity. He realized that the face he’d thought was his own was simply a reflection in the round face shield of a helmet. Mike tried to pull away as a bulky figure in an astronaut’s space suit pulled him up into a sitting position.

“It’s okay, Mike. It’s okay,” the muffled voice said.

“Who—who are you?” Mike asked, still wary.

“Guess I don’t need this anymore.” The astronaut began removing his helmet. “Been wearing it just in case there was anything left in the air.”

The voice sounded vaguely familiar to Mike, but he couldn’t quite place it. When the man removed the helmet, Mike’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Commander

Schaeffer?”

“That’s right, Mike.” Commander Schaeffer smiled warmly.

“But how—?” Mike’s head still felt foggy.

“I know it’s hard for you to understand right now, but, Mike, you and I are both being held prisoners.”

“Wait a minute.” Mike closed his eyes and tried to concentrate as he took it all in. He opened his eyes again and looked back at Commander Schaeffer. “If this is real, where’s the rest of your crew?”

“They’re being held in another part of this compound. They separated us because I wasn’t complying.”

“No! This can’t be.” Mike wanted to believe what he was seeing, but he couldn’t trust his senses anymore. “It’s just my mind playing another trick!”

Commander Schaeffer put his gloved hand on Mike’s shoulder and gently squeezed. “Mike, I assure you that although many things here are not what they seem—I *am very real!*”



Winnie, Ben, and Spence emerged from the thick stand of chaparral and walked out onto the desert sand dunes.

“Yep. You can see Mike came this way.” Spence pointed to a clear set of footprints in the sand. “All we’ve got to do is follow his tracks.”

“Over there!” Winnie pointed ahead. “Looks like he stopped at the peak of that sand dune.”

The three detectives ran quickly toward the top of the ridge, Ben trailing behind.

“You guys don’t think there’s any quicksand around here, do you?” Ben looked around nervously.

“C’mon!” Winnie motioned for him to follow. “We’ve got wormholes that can suck us into outer space, and you’re worried about quicksand?”

Spence reached the top of the ridge first and looked at the old military base below. “There it is! Everybody, stay low so

they don't spot us!"

The three detectives carefully peered over the edge and studied the base with their binoculars.

"Look," Winnie pointed out. "Isn't that someone standing out in front of the biggest building?"

"Do you think it's Mike?" Ben asked hopefully.

"No." Spence studied the figure. "It's some kind of soldier. He's wearing a gas mask and . . . I think he's holding Mike's daypack!"

"That is Mike's stuff!" Winnie confirmed.

They watched as the distant soldier emptied the contents of Mike's daypack onto the hood of a jeep.

"They've got his walkie-talkie, too!" Ben exclaimed.

"Maybe we should go back to town and get some help."

"I don't think so," Winnie said. "Who would believe us?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Ben asked.

"Cosmic wormholes?" Winnie said flatly.

"Winnie's right. No one will believe us." Spence started packing up his binoculars into his daypack. "That's why it's up to us to go down there."

Ben closed his eyes as if in pain. "I was afraid you were gonna say that."



The shabby room Mike and Commander Schaeffer were locked in appeared to have once been a conference room or a breakroom. It featured a small grimy kitchen on one wall. The other three walls had large glass windows with closed Venetian blinds. The tables and chairs in the room were straight out of the 1950s. Dust and cobwebs covered everything.

Commander Schaeffer listened intently as Mike finished telling him about the events that had led him to the old military base.

"That's quite a story, Mike. And I'm so sorry you had to go through some of that. But let me assure you that most of the really bad stuff never happened. The black hole, your dad

dying—I'm certain that those were hallucinations caused by this." Commander Schaeffer held up a small clear glass vial containing a green powder.

"What is that stuff?" Mike asked.

"Scientists hope that the contents of this small vial could put an end to future wars."

"Chemical warfare?" Mike frowned, puzzled.

"A very *humane* weapon, Mike, that causes no permanent damage. A weapon so powerful that it could defeat an enemy without a shot ever being fired."

"But how?" Mike asked.

"Even the slightest exposure to this extremely potent compound causes heightened paranoia and hallucinations."

Commander Schaeffer slipped the vial back into a pocket of his space suit. "In other words, you experience your worst fears. In your case, that was—"

"My dad dying," Mike finished the sentence for him.

"The compound can only be processed in the ZERO-Gs of space, which is why we had it on the shuttle and—"

"Commander Schaeffer," Mike interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure what *is* or *isn't* real anymore. I mean, I saw—no, *everybody* saw—your shuttle explode on reentry."

"Well, I'm here, aren't I? And if you need further proof"—Commander Schaeffer walked over to one of the windows and opened a hole in the Venetian blind for Mike to look through—"then check this out!"

Mike peered through the small hole in the blind and saw that the window looked down on the interior of a huge hangar. In the middle of the cavernous room sat the space shuttle *Explorer*—completely intact! A half dozen men wearing gas masks were busy unloading its contents.

Mike turned back to Commander Schaeffer. "But the explosion. That *had* to be real!"

"What you saw was our payload," Commander Schaeffer explained. "A communications satellite that we were bringing back. They released it so it would enter Earth's atmosphere on the exact trajectory and at the exact time the space shuttle was expected."

“They? Who’s *they*?”

“Mike, you and I are prisoners of a coalition of terrorist countries intent on stealing the ‘fear compound.’” Commander Schaeffer shook his head in disgust. “They somehow infiltrated my crew, faked the shuttle disaster, and forced me to land on the dry lake bed outside. Once we landed, a small force was waiting to execute the remainder of their plan.”

“It’s all so incredible!” Mike said.

“They used the classic bait-and-switch technique. Do you know what that is?”

Mike shook his head no.

“When I was in high school, I thought I wanted to be a magician, and the first thing I learned was the age-old principle of ‘misdirection.’” Commander Schaeffer held up his hands for Mike to see. “The idea is you distract people with one hand while you’re busy doing something else with the other. You follow?”

“Sure,” Mike replied.

“Well, in this case, everyone was so intent on the explosion that they missed what was really going on. I’m sure NASA knows something’s wrong and is reexamining their flight data as we speak. But I’m afraid that by the time they put all the pieces together, it will be too late.”

Chapter 12

WINNIE, BEN, AND SPENCE huddled behind a crumbling cinder-block wall less than forty yards from one of the main hangars.

So far they hadn't been spotted, but the guard they'd watched earlier was still keeping lookout. On his right was the jeep with Mike's daypack and belongings scattered across the hood. On the guard's left side was the door they'd seen him come out of. It was still slightly ajar.

"That's our way in," Spence whispered.

"But he'll see us!" Ben whispered back.

"How long is he just going to stand there?" Winnie wondered.

A smile slowly grew across Ben's face. "Hey, guys!" Ben held up his walkie-talkie. "Watch this!"



The walkie-talkie sitting on the hood of the jeep suddenly made a loud beeping noise. The guard looked over at it but didn't move.

"Hey!" Ben's voice called over the walkie-talkie. "Hey, you!"

The guard's head tilted slightly as he looked over at the walkie-talkie on the hood.

"That's right. I'm talking to you, you big chowderhead!"

Now Ben really had his attention.

"What's the matter? Did they make you wear that gas mask because your breath is so bad?"

The guard looked back and forth, realizing that whoever was speaking over the walkie-talkie must be able to see him. He finally turned and marched over to the jeep to investigate. Behind him, the three kids quickly raced across the open yard and disappeared into the hangar.



Spence quietly closed the door behind them and slid the bolt lock closed. "Good thinking, Ben!"

The kids turned to take in their surroundings. The inside of the facility looked even worse than the outside. Rays of light came streaming through small rust holes in the ceiling. Though a heavy haze hung in the air, the kids could see that old industrial furniture, file cabinets, and boxes were strewn everywhere. Towers of old computer equipment that must have been high-tech once, now looked antiquated and obsolete. Everything was covered in cobwebs and a thick layer of dust. Large dark rooms led to even darker hallways. The question was: Where should they start looking for Mike?

"This place reeks!" Ben said, holding his nose. "What is that smell?"

Spence made a face as well. "I don't know, but let's get this over with. We better split up and find Mike."

"Split up? Now hold on a minute!" Ben protested.

"Look, if we split up, we'll find Mike faster," Winnie explained. "And the faster we find Mike, the faster we all get out of here."

"Well, I'm all for that." Ben looked around at the creepy darkness. "But I still think one of us should stay here."

Winnie sighed and gave him a dirty look.

"In case something goes wrong," Ben said defensively. "I'm just trying to think of you guys!"

Winnie pulled a flashlight out of her daypack. "Let's go!"

The three detectives slowly headed off in different directions.



Commander Schaeffer rolled his shoulder forward and winced in pain as he slipped his right hand into a makeshift sling.

"I hadn't noticed before, but what happened to your arm?" Mike asked.

"Oh, this?" Commander Schaeffer lifted his arm and

winned again. “When we landed, several of the crew members and I tried one last-ditch effort to destroy the compound.” Commander Schaeffer shrugged. “Let’s just say we weren’t exactly successful.” He reached into his suit and pulled out the small glass vial. “We did manage to smuggle out two of these, though.”

“How come you still have that stuff? Didn’t they carefully search you?” Mike asked.

“Like I said, I once was an amateur magician.” Commander Schaeffer quickly closed his hand, and when he opened it back up, the vial was gone. He opened his other hand to show Mike that he had palmed the vial. “Comes in handy.”

Mike was impressed. “That’s pretty good!”

Commander Schaeffer returned the vial to a pocket in his suit. “This is the last one, though. We managed to release the other one in the air ducts last night. It sent a cloud out over the entire base and surrounding areas.”

“That explains what happened to Smitty and the Wilsons,” Mike realized. “And what I walked into this afternoon!”

“Yeah, but you only got a light dose. Last night, most of the terrorists received a full exposure before they could get their gas masks on. Some ran off into the desert. Others are being held until the effects wear off—which is anybody’s guess. In the meantime, there’s only a small skeleton crew remaining.”

“But you’ve got one vial left! Maybe we could—”

“No. They’ve wised up and are wearing their gas masks all the time now. And for good reason. I’m sure some of the substance is still lingering around—maybe on lower floors—because I keep getting a whiff of it every once in a while. That’s the reason I was wearing my helmet earlier.”

Mike slowly nodded his head. “Right.”

“Really, the only way we can stop them now is to get help from the outside.”

“My friends are out there somewhere. If only I still had my walkie-talkie . . .” Mike’s eyes suddenly lit up. “Spence’s wristwatch!”



Spence struggled to find his way down a dark corridor. Reaching into his daypack, he pulled out a baseball cap and placed it on his head. He pulled off the front patch and had an instant beam of light flooding his path.

Mike's voice suddenly came over the walkie-talkie. *"Eagle Two, Three, Four . . . Do you copy?"*

Spence grabbed the walkie-talkie off his hip. "Mike! Is that you?"

"Yeah, your wristwatch invention actually works!"

Spence remembered that the guard outside was also listening in. "Mike, we've got a snoop. Go to channel thirty-four."

"Wait a minute, Spence. How do I change channels on a wristwatch?"

"Just set the second hand to the channel you want," Spence explained.

"Roger that!"



The Last Chance Detectives had enough experience with walkie-talkies to know that people could easily eavesdrop. So, Spence had devised a clever mathematical code to fool anyone who might be listening in on their conversations. The secret to Spence's code was simple addition. He'd asked Mike to use channel thirty-four even though two-way radios only have fifteen usable channels. All Mike had to do was add three and four together to know the new channel was seven.

Mike pulled out the stem of the watch and set the second hand at 7:00. Then he lifted the wristwatch to his mouth.

"Spence? You there?"

"We're all here, Mike!" It was Winnie's voice.

"Where are you guys?" Mike asked.

"We're right here on this creepy base! Where are you?" Ben asked.

"I've been taken captive along with—" Mike began.

"Wait a second, Mike," Commander Schaeffer interrupted.

“If they’re here on the base, you’d better warn them about the ‘fear compound.’”

“Tell us where you are, and we’ll come get you,” Spence offered.

“Hold on! There’s something very important I need to tell you first.” Mike didn’t want his friends to have to go through what he had. “Be careful because—”

The door handle to the room in which they were being held captive suddenly rattled. Mike could hear keys sliding into the lock.

Mike quickly turned the receiver on the watch off and set it down on a nearby table.

Commander Schaeffer threw a rag over the watch. “Hang on, Mike. This may get ugly.”

Chapter 13

MIKE AND COMMANDER SCHAEFFER stepped away from the table as a burly figure dressed in army fatigues entered the room. The man removed his gas mask, revealing a face that had classically handsome features buried under a thin layer of healed scar tissue. Mike guessed that sometime in this man's past, he'd been burned in a horrible fire. It was apparent where plastic surgeons had applied skin grafts in an attempt to make him look normal again. The man gave them a crooked smile that was anything but friendly.

Commander Schaeffer spoke first. "Chuck Munson, I still can't believe—"

"That one of NASA's senior training advisors would be part of all this?" Munson chuckled as he removed gloves from his scarred hands. "I'd find your naiveté amusing if you hadn't become such a thorn in my side."

"Where's my crew?" Commander Schaeffer demanded.

"Trust me, they are faring much better than most of my men did last night."

"Bad dreams, huh?" Commander Schaeffer asked with a slight smile.

Munson was not amused. "Curious thing, though, Commander. Somehow, I get this foreboding sense of dread. As if your crew members' very lives were hanging in the balance."

"Munson, if you so much as—!"

"Let me assure you, Commander, I'll do everything within my power to keep my men from exacting their revenge for what you did to them last night." Munson reached down and removed the rag that had been covering the watch. "But if you want to get back on their good side, it would behoove you to show us a sign of good faith. Don't you think?"

"Like what?" Commander Schaeffer asked.

Mike watched nervously as Munson picked up the wristwatch.

“The ‘fear compound.’” Munson closely examined the face of the watch. “Each and every grain of the compound is extremely valuable to us. We collected and accounted for almost all the vials. Only two are missing. And we both know how you wasted one of them by putting it into the air ducts.”

Munson suddenly slammed the watch down on the table and stepped in to stand nose to nose with Commander Schaeffer.

“But I will not be denied the other!”



Winnie made her way down a narrow hallway littered with file cabinets, old office furniture, and packing boxes. It was a tight squeeze, but she continued forward. Her flashlight beam shined dully in the hazy atmosphere.

Mike had not responded to their radio calls for several minutes. But Winnie and her friends each took turns trying to get him to respond.

“*Come in, Eagle One,*” Ben’s voice called over Winnie’s radio.

“Forget it, Ben,” Winnie spoke into her walkie-talkie. “Something must’ve happened to his radio. All we can do is keep looking and hope we hear from him again.”

“*But be careful, you guys,*” Spence transmitted from another part of the building. “*It sounded like he was trying to warn us about something.*”

“Ewww!” Winnie pushed her way through a thick curtain of cobwebs. “Sure hope it had nothing to do with creepy crawlers.”



The corridor Spence was exploring took a turn and then opened into a medium-sized room. The fog-like haze was much lighter in this room and allowed him to see well enough

to tell that it had once been some sort of laboratory.

Tables were scattered with beakers, scales, and dusty old electronics. Pipes—with gauges attached to them—ran from floor to ceiling.

But the thing that really caught Spence's interest was a large, transparent testing chamber in the middle of the room. It was shaped like a tube and ran from floor to ceiling. A glass door was on one side, just big enough to allow a person to enter.

Spence realized that it looked just like a set piece used in a sci-fi television series he liked to watch. On the weekly show, Doctor Atom used a tubular glass chamber to put himself into a state of suspended animation as he traveled through time.

The glass chamber Spence now stood before was almost an exact copy. His curiosity got the best of him, and he stepped into the chamber to see what it felt like.

Spence was so busy looking at the gauges inside that he didn't notice the door slowly swing closed. When the latch clicked into place, Spence realized he'd made a huge mistake.

He calmly gave the door a push, but it wouldn't open. He pushed harder. Still nothing. Spence braced himself against the opposite wall and pushed as hard as he could. The door didn't budge an inch.

"How did I *not* see that coming?" he mumbled. "All right, Spence, the main thing now is not to panic. All you've got to do is call for help."

Spence pulled the walkie-talkie from its holster and raised it to his lips. "Winnie? Ben? I'm gonna need somebody to help me out here."

"*What's the matter?*" Ben responded.

"I think I may have got myself locked into a . . ." Spence searched for the words. "Well, I guess you'd call it a test chamber."

Spence gave up pushing on the door, looked around, and discovered a lever near the door but at floor level. "Wait a minute." Spence reached for the lever. "I may have found a way out!"

Spence turned the lever, but the door didn't open. Instead, he heard the low thud of a valve opening and the groan of old pipes being pressurized. His eyes opened wide in horror as he looked down toward his feet. The metal grate he was standing on was bubbling with slowly rising water!



Winnie had run into a dead end. Her flashlight revealed that the room she was now in was so thick with cobwebs that no one could've possibly been there for decades.

"Guys!" Spence's voice sounded serious. *"I'm in real trouble here! Hurry!"*

"Don't worry, Spence! We're on our way!" Winnie radioed back.

Winnie quickly retraced her footsteps but slowed when she came to the curtain of thick cobwebs she had broken through earlier. From the side she now stood on, things looked entirely different. It wasn't just an old dusty cobweb she had pushed her way through—it was actually an impossibly huge spiderweb that funneled down into the corner of the room. The large strands of webbing looked fresh. They glistened and cast shadows as her flashlight moved across their threads.

If I can just squeeze by the way I came, she thought.

She was about to move forward when something caught her eye. She focused her flashlight a few inches to the left of the hole she had made earlier and discovered a spider-egg sac the size of a softball.

"No!" she whispered. "Anything but spiders!"

Winnie had no choice. Since there was no other way out of this room, she would have to go back the way she came. She turned sideways, leaned away from the egg sac, and slowly started inching forward. Her shoulder accidentally caught on part of the webbing and it slightly shook the sac. Winnie froze perfectly still and held her breath. The egg sac bounced and then settled back into place. Winnie noticed a small split across the middle of the egg sac that hadn't been

there a moment earlier. Spindly legs reached out of the crack and a small black spider crawled out.

Mustering all her courage, Winnie slowly reached forward and gingerly flicked the spider away. The slight movement made the webbing bounce once again. Now awakened, the egg sac suddenly burst open. Hundreds of hairy black spiders fell out and darted in all directions.

Winnie screamed involuntarily and jumped away from the web, back into the room. Her only way out was now blocked by a quickly spreading army of arachnids!



Commander Schaeffer placed his hands on Mike's shoulders and tried to appeal to Munson. "At least let the kid go, Munson. He's an innocent party in this."

"You know I can't do that."

"C'mon!" Commander Schaeffer looked at him sternly. "It's obvious you've got no loyalty to your country, but you've still gotta have a little compassion in there somewhere."

"Compassion? You're going to lecture me about compassion?" Munson's voice trembled with anger. "Look at my face! Just look at it!"

Mike and Commander Schaeffer remained silent as the words echoed in the room.

Munson regained his composure and started pacing the room. "I served my country. I gave the space program the very best I had. Over three thousand hours in a cockpit. Earned two master's degrees in biological and computer sciences. Was ranked at the very top of my class. And what did I get in return?" Munson pointed to his scarred face. "They gave me this!"

"You can't blame anyone for that fire," Commander Schaeffer reasoned. "A bolt of lightning hit your capsule while it was still on the launchpad."

"But I *can* blame them for not giving me another chance!" Munson's anger was beginning to boil over again. "No one has any idea of the agony I went through in rehabilitation. No one

could possibly know how hard I trained to make a comeback!”

“But they took you back!”

“As an instructor, Schaeffer. An instructor! Do you have any idea what they pay *instructors*?”

“No,” Commander Schaeffer quietly admitted. “No, I don’t.”

“That’s what I thought.” Munson lowered his voice. “I realize now that I’ll never be a celebrated astronaut like you, Schaeffer. I’ll only be a tragic footnote in NASA’s long, storied history. So, if I can’t enjoy the fame of being an astronaut, then I say I deserve some fortune!”

Chapter 14

THE WATER IN THE GLASS CHAMBER in which Spence was trapped had already risen to his knees.

“You guys better hurry!” he yelled into his walkie-talkie. “I’m not kidding!”

“I’m on my way,” Ben responded.

Since the glass chamber was about eight feet tall, Spence estimated that it would take approximately five minutes to totally fill. The problem was that Spence was only four feet tall, and he had absolutely no idea how to swim.

The reason he couldn’t swim went back to an event in Spence’s past.

When Spence was still a toddler, his mother had been putting him into a fresh set of clothes after a bath. She left momentarily to answer the door and although it took only fifteen seconds, when she returned, she was horrified to find that he’d tottered back into the bathroom and had fallen into the tub. Only her quick response had saved him from drowning. Though Spence wasn’t physically harmed in the incident, from that point on he suffered from aquaphobia—a deep fear of water.

The water in the glass test chamber was quickly reaching Spence’s waist. He desperately kicked at the glass wall but found that it was too thick to break. The water showed no sign of slowing.



Ben stumbled forward in the dark, retracing his footsteps on his way to help Spence. He had just made it to the large main room where the three of them had split up earlier when he got another call on his walkie-talkie.

“Ben! It’s Winnie! Help! Please!” Winnie radioed.

“Uh . . .” Ben hesitated, not sure what to do. “Right now?”

“Yes, right now!”

Ben took a few steps toward Winnie’s passage then stopped and looked back at the hallway where he had last seen Spence. “But I gotta help Spence!”



Winnie backed into the middle of the room, frantically sweeping her flashlight beam back and forth. She discovered there were spiders all around her—scampering over boxes, climbing the walls, even on the ceiling. They were not just baby spiders anymore. Winnie noticed that some were quite large.

“Ben!” she yelled into her walkie-talkie.

“Spence needs me!” Ben’s voice said over the radio.

A tarantula-sized spider leaped toward Winnie. She quickly dodged out of the way but could feel spiders crunching under her feet. “I need you more!” she squealed. “Trust me!”

“Okay, okay!” Ben radioed back. *“I’m on my way!”*

“Don’t leave me, Ben!” It was Spence’s voice. *“I can’t swim!”*



Back at the conference room in which Mike and Commander Schaeffer were being held captive, Munson paused at the door before leaving.

“We’ve nearly come to the end of my patience, Commander. If you don’t come up with that last vial within the next hour, I’ll unleash my men. They’ll come up here and tear this place—and you, I’m afraid—apart.”

“Threats now? C’mon, Chuck! You’re better than this.”

Munson ignored the comment and continued, “Or you can simply cooperate, and I’ll be . . .” He seemed to search for the right word. “Merciful!”

Commander Schaeffer shook his head in disbelief. “Vial or no vial, you’re never going to let us out of here alive.”

Munson stepped into the outer hallway and smiled back at

them. “Commander, there are many ways to die. I never said I was going to let you live. I said I would be merciful.”

Munson closed the door and locked it securely behind him. Mike waited until he heard Munson’s footsteps trail away into the distance before he picked up his watch from the table. He pulled the metal stem up and the face of the watch lit up.

“Eagle Two!” Mike called. “Are you still out there?”

“We’re here, Eagle One! But we’ve got some serious problems!” Spence’s voice sounded panicked. *“I’m trapped in some sort of chamber that’s filling with water!”*



Winnie danced around desperately, not sure where to step next. Spiders were appearing everywhere—the floor, the walls, even the ceiling.

“Spiders, Mike! Spiders! They’re everywhere!” Winnie tried not to hyperventilate. “Hurry, Ben! Hurry!”

“Okay! Easy!” Mike said over the radio. *“Everybody, just calm down for a minute.”*

A large spider with an abdomen the size of a baseball descended directly over Winnie—its legs wiggling wildly as it reached for her. Winnie held her flashlight defensively, like a small baseball bat.

“Calm down? You want me to calm down?!” Winnie swung the flashlight as hard as she could and hit a line drive into the darkness.

“Just get me outta here!” she screamed.



Mike felt horrible listening to his friends as they suffered from the effects of the fear compound. From his own recent experience, he knew just how real the experience could seem.

“Everybody, listen to me!” he called into the two-way radio. “What you’re experiencing is just in your imagination!”

*“You’re trying to tell me”—*Spence coughed—*“that this water*

I'm swallowing isn't real?"

"That's right! The water, the spiders, none of it is real!"

As Commander Schaeffer listened in on Mike's conversation, a concerned look came over his face. He had been leaning against a large, exposed pipe that ran from floor to ceiling. He now realized that the pipe was vibrating.

"Repeat: It is not real!" Mike continued. "What you're experiencing is—"

"Hold on, Mike!" Commander Schaeffer held his ear against the pipe and listened. "Oh no!"

"What is it?" Mike asked.

"I hear water moving through the pipe. I'm afraid some of it might be real after all!"



The water in the experimental tube was up past Spence's shoulders. With one hand he held his walkie-talkie above the waterline. He knew that he couldn't let the radio get wet—it was his only lifeline to the others. With his free hand, he did his best imitation of a dog paddle. He tilted his head back and tried to keep his mouth above the water.

In all the time Spence had known Mike, he'd never known Mike to tell a lie. So if his friend said that the water wasn't real, Spence was going to do his best to believe him.

"This isn't real. This isn't real. This isn't real," he repeated.



Ben stumbled and then fell over a box as he tried to make his way to Winnie. He was having a tough go of it and could barely catch his breath. Not only was it difficult for him to see where he was going because of the darkness, but he also wasn't nearly as thin as Winnie—which meant he couldn't squeeze through areas she had. He got back to his feet and pushed a packing crate out of his way.

"*Hurry, Ben!*" Winnie called over the radio.

"Almost there, Winnie! I think I can see your flashlight up

ahead!"

"Ben!" It was Mike's voice. *"This is important! Go back and get Spence! We think he might be in some real trouble!"*

"But what about Winnie?" Ben asked, gasping for breath.

"Forget about Winnie! This is urgent!"

"What?" Winnie's voice sounded furious. *"Forget about Winnie? Let me tell you something, Mike Fowler!"*

Ben took a deep breath and started back the way he came. "I wish they'd just make up their minds," he muttered.



The water in the test chamber had risen higher than Spence was tall. But he discovered that he didn't have to swim if he jammed his legs and free arm against one side of the tube and held his back against the other side. In this position he was able to shimmy toward the top of the tube, keeping his head and walkie-talkie a few inches above the rising water line.

"Spence, are you hanging in there?" Mike asked over the walkie-talkie.

"Yeah, but I think"—Spence accidentally took in a mouthful of water and coughed again—"I think I'm running out of time here!"

Chapter 15

BEN STAGGERED BACK to the large main room where the detectives had split up earlier. He could see the hallway that Spence had gone down, but he needed to catch his breath before he could continue on. He bent forward—with his hands on his knees—and took a couple of deep breaths.

That's when he heard the sound of a bouncing rubber ball. A bell inside the ball jingled each time the ball hit the ground.

Ben didn't even need to look up. The small red ball rolled to a stop between his feet. On the side of the ball there was a gold star. And in the middle of the star was the letter "C."

A hideous giggle came from someplace in the darkness and echoed off the walls.

"Oh, no," Ben groaned.

"*Ben? Are you on your way to Spence?*" Mike's voice asked from the walkie-talkie.

"Mike, I've run into a slight snag."

"*What kind of snag?*"

Ben already knew what he would see, but he had to look up anyway—just to confirm it.

Twenty yards away, the figure of a clown emerged from the shadows. He had chalk-white skin, wild emerald-green hair, and a red rubber nose. He wore a purple ruffled suit emblazoned with stars, moons, and comets. His ruby-red lips pulled back to form a grin that was unnaturally wide—almost reaching to his ears.

"It's Clarence the Cosmic Clown." Ben was barely able to say the words.

"*The clown from that comic book?*" Mike asked. "*Ben, go get Spence now! You know that clown can't be real!*"

Clarence swaggered across the room and stopped directly in the path Ben would need to take to get to Spence. Reaching into his pocket, the clown pulled out a long balloon that

immediately inflated in his hand. Clarence pantomimed a surprised look and let it drop to the floor. The balloon began to move on its own toward Ben, slithering across the floor like a snake.

"Looks pretty real to me," Ben's voice trembled.

"I promise you! None of what you're seeing is real!"

"That's what you told Spence," Ben reminded Mike.

The balloon snake slowly wrapped itself around Ben's ankle.



Spence had shimmied to the top of the glass test chamber and could go no farther. His forehead was now against the ceiling, and the water continued to rise. He could hear Mike trying to get Winnie and Ben to help him, but it sounded like they had problems of their own. There was no longer room for the walkie-talkie to remain dry. As the water reached the mouthpiece Spence hit the button for one last transmission.

"Would somebody—*anybody*—do *something*!"



Mike and Commander Schaeffer listened helplessly to the calls for help. All Mike could do was try to encourage his friends.

"C'mon, guys! Spence needs you!"

"But these spiders." Winnie's voice was on the verge of tears. *"Some of these things could eat a small dog!"*

"Winnie! Ben! You've got to listen to me," Mike pleaded. "I've learned something very important lately. You can't let your feelings mislead you. You've gotta trust what you *know* is true!"



With no place left to run, Winnie found herself backed into the corner of the room. She stepped onto a chair to get off the floor, which was teeming with spiders. She tried to hang onto

a nearby bulletin board, but it broke away from the wall and crashed to the floor. Winnie could now see a large gaping hole in the wall where the bulletin board had hung. Out of the dark cavity rose a spider that was as big as a dog.

"It's not real," Mike's voice repeated. *"Trust what you know is true!"*

"I want to, Mike! But there's a spider here that's large enough to eat me!"

"You know there's no such thing! Winnie, you can beat this!"

"How?"

Mike's voice remained calm. *"Trust what you know to be true and take a step of faith."*

With a sudden, quick burst of speed, the spider was now only a couple of feet away. Winnie could see herself reflected in all eight of its eyes. "I don't think I can," Winnie admitted.

"Spence's life is on the line!" Mike reminded her.

"Okay, Mike. *OKAY!* I'll try . . . for Spence!" Winnie reached a trembling hand toward the huge head of the spider. "There's no such thing as giant, man-eating spiders. There's no such thing as giant, man-eating spiders."

No longer able to look, Winnie closed her eyes tight and let out a small scream as she grabbed the head of the giant spider. It felt lumpy and full of strands, almost like the head of a mop.

Winnie slowly opened her eyes to see . . . It was a mop! She was holding nothing more than the head of a mop! In fact, there wasn't a trace of a single spider in the entire room.

"It worked, Mike! It worked!"



Ben stomped on the balloon snake that Clarence the Cosmic Clown had sent after him. It was a short-lived victory because Clarence had already moved on to juggling a series of balls. The crazed look in the clown's eyes made his evil intentions clear.

"All right, Ben," Mike radioed. *"You heard what happened to Winnie. Now it's your turn!"*

"Yeah, okay." Ben took a tentative step forward. "I think I'm ready."

"Just one step at a time," Mike reminded him.

As Ben walked forward, Clarence threw one of the balls at his feet. It exploded in a shower of sparks, smoke, and confetti. Ben let out a startled yell and ran back to the shelter of a large crate.

"I want to believe you, Mike! I really do! He just seems so real!"



In the conference room, Captain Schaeffer tapped Mike on the shoulder. "Your friend has probably only received a low exposure to the compound. Perhaps he's open to a positive suggestion as well."

"Like what?"

"I don't know exactly. But try to get him to think of something that he could use to fight back against his fear."

Mike thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "I think I've got it!"



Ben had never been more afraid in all his life. He slowly peered around the crate he'd been hiding behind.

Clarence the Clown stared at Ben from only a few yards away. He was illuminated by a spotlight coming from some unknown source high in the warehouse. Steam-driven calliope music echoed faintly throughout the room.

The clown pulled a multicolored pinwheel from behind his back and smiled, showing his crooked yellow teeth. He then blew into the pinwheel, causing its blades to spin round and round. It all looked rather innocent, but Ben knew better. Something bad was about to go down; it was just a matter of when.

"*Ben!*" Mike's sudden voice over the walkie-talkie startled Ben.

"What?" Ben watched the blades of the pinwheel spin

faster and faster. And grow larger and larger. They were almost hypnotic.

“Remember when the Action Rangers met Clarence the Clown?” Mike asked.

Clarence suddenly flicked the pinwheel toward Ben, and the spinning cluster of blades shot forward. It hit the crate next to Ben and tore right through it like a buzzsaw.

“Right now’s not a good time to be discussing comic books, Mike!” Ben anxiously searched for something more solid to hide behind.

“Yes, it is,” Mike insisted. *“Think back, Ben! What was the one thing the Action Rangers used to beat Clarence?”*

Ben pushed over a stack of boxes toward Clarence. The clown easily jumped over the obstacle as if he had springs in his shoes.

“Mike, I really don’t think I’m gonna come across an Action Ranger Cosmic Pie Launcher anytime soon!”

“But, Ben, you’re holding one in your hands!”

“Right! Good try, Mike. But, no, I’m not—” The words caught in Ben’s throat. He looked down into his hands and saw that he was holding the defensive weapon no Action Ranger would ever be caught without.

“Wow!” Ben’s eyes filled with wonder. “An Official Model X-4 Plasma-Powered Coconut Custard Pie Cannon!”

Clarence came to a halt as he, too, recognized what Ben was holding. The toothy smile quickly disappeared and the calliope music ground to a halt.

“All right, Bozo!” Ben racked a round into the cannon’s chamber. “No more clowning around!”



The glass tube that entrapped Spence was almost entirely filled with water. He gave up trying to save the walkie-talkie and let it sink to the bottom of the chamber. With only an inch of air left, Spence tilted his head back and filled his lungs with air one last time. A moment later the air pocket had completely disappeared. Spence started sinking to the bottom

of the chamber and wondered how long he would be able to hold his breath.



Clarence the Clown was no longer laughing. He desperately tried to get away as Ben fearlessly marched forward, shooting pies in his direction.

“Oh yeah!” Ben yelled. “Now this is what I’m talking about!”

The bazooka-sized cannon at his waist recoiled, again and again, unleashing an endless supply of coconut custard pies. Clarence yelped in fear and used his spring shoes to dodge from one side of the room to the other. Pies flew in all directions, splattering everything they hit.

Ben switched the lever on his pie cannon to full-automatic and began spraying down the room unmercifully.

Clarence upended a table and ducked behind it. Using the table as a shield, the clown picked it up and charged forward. Ben fired pie after pie—but it was useless; Clarence was too well protected.

The onrushing table hit Ben in the chest and sent him sprawling onto the ground. The Plasma-Powered Coconut Custard Pie Cannon fell out of his arms and spun across the floor—disappearing in the shadows.

Clarence didn’t waste any time. The clown dropped his shield and sprang forward. Ben rolled onto his back and looked up to see Clarence towering over him. The clown was holding four pinwheels. The blades began spinning faster and faster. Clarence threw his head back, laughing hysterically.

Ben could see a twisted mixture of triumphant glee and pure deranged insanity in the clown’s crazed eyes.

SMACK!

A pie hit Clarence squarely in the face and splattered coconut custard over the wall behind him. The round rubber nose on his face let loose with a miserable squeak.

“Say hello to my little friend!” Ben lay on the ground, holding a small, single-shot version of the pie cannon. “Action

Rangers always carry a backup!”

As the coconut custard slowly dripped down his face, Clarence began to fade away. Within moments he had completely disappeared, and all signs of the epic pie fight were gone.

Winnie rushed into the room. She seemed startled to find Ben on the floor. “Well, what’re you doing just sitting there?”

Ben began to explain, but Winnie rushed past him and sped down the hall. “C’mon! We gotta save Spence!”

Chapter 16

WHEN WINNIE RAN UP TO the experimental chamber, she thought she had arrived too late. Spence lay lifelessly near the bottom of the water-filled glass tube. As Ben ran up behind her, Winnie frantically searched for a handle or latch that would release the thick Plexiglas door.

“Just open it!” Ben yelled.

“There’s no handle!” Winnie screamed.

Ben grabbed a nearby old wooden folding chair. “Stand back!”

He swung the chair as hard as he could directly into the glass chamber. On impact, the chair splintered into many termite-infested pieces. It didn’t even crack the thick glass tube.

“Oh no!” Winnie bitterly dropped to her knees beside the chamber, but then noticed that the chair’s impact had made Spence’s eyes blink open. “He’s not dead yet!”

“Yeah, but he soon will be!” Ben cried.

Spence wildly pointed at something at the base of the chamber.

“What? What is it, Spence?” Winnie’s eyes followed to where Spence was pointing. In the dark, she could barely make out a small, two-inch metal square at the base of the chamber. “A foot lever!”

Winnie smashed the lever down and the door sprung open, releasing a torrential wall of water. Spence was carried out with it—coughing, sputtering, and gasping for air.

“Spence!” Ben ran to his side. “Holy smoke! You could’ve drowned in there!”

Spence looked up at him in frustrated disbelief. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”



Mike and Commander Schaeffer impatiently paced the conference room, waiting to hear if Winnie and Ben had saved Spence in time.

“Eagle One! We’ve got Spence!” Winnie’s voice reported over the radio.

“Is he okay?” Mike asked.

“Wet. But otherwise just fine!”

“Great! Now you can get us out of here. We figure that we’re one floor up. Directly above the test chamber.”

“We’re on our way,” Winnie assured him.

“But be careful,” Mike warned. “I’m pretty sure they’ve got a guard stationed outside our door.”



In the outer hallway, a guard sat at a small table, humming to himself while he played a game of solitaire.

A rat suddenly ran out of a nearby doorway, darted directly toward him, and disappeared under the table. The startled guard yelled in surprise and jumped to his feet, knocking his playing cards off the table and across the floor.

“Dirty rodents!” yelled the guard, embarrassed that he had allowed himself to be startled by such a small creature.

The rat continued on its way down the hallway and scurried into a large storage closet.

The guard couldn’t help himself. He just had to chase after it. Not that he was expecting to find anything. He knew that most rodents have a unique ability to disappear into the smallest of cracks. The guard stepped into the storage closet, snapped on his flashlight, and was surprised to spot the rodent immediately. The rat was in the far corner of the closet, running repeatedly into the wall. The rat finally hit so hard that it flipped over onto its back.

And that’s when the guard realized he could hear the faint sound of motorized gears spinning. He took several steps deeper into the closet and crouched down to examine the rat. By the time he realized that it was a rubber decoy on a radio control car frame, the door behind him had slammed shut.



Spence, who was still dripping wet, shoved a small metal pin into the storage closet door's lock, and snapped it off. "That'll hold him for a while."

"Way to go, Spence!" Ben exclaimed.

"Yeah," added Winnie. "That's what I call a rat trap!"

Ben found the guard's key ring sitting on the table where he'd left it. Ben tossed it to Winnie, who was waiting by the conference room's door. As she began trying various keys in the lock, Ben picked up his walkie-talkie.

"Mike! The cavalry is here!"



In the hangar adjacent to the conference room, Charles Munson watched his men offload the final items out of the space shuttle.

"The air should be clear now. You can lose the gas masks," he called to his men. "And get the *Explorer* rigged to blow! I don't want a shred of evidence left behind!"

"Sir!" A guard ran up, pointing to the walkie-talkie in his hand. "I came across some suspicious transmissions on another frequency and thought you should hear it!" The guard lifted his two-way radio so Munson could listen.

"*Mike, we'll have you out of there in just a second,*" a young girl's voice said.

"*Way to go, Winnie!*" the boy named Mike responded. "*Just wait until you see who I have in here with me.*"

Munson's face turned red with anger, and he grabbed his own walkie-talkie. "Shaw!" he shouted into the radio.

There was no response. Only radio static.

"Shaw!" Munson repeated. "What's happening up there?"

Still no response.

Munson pointed at two of his nearby men. "Matthews! Duhome! Come with me! Hurry!"



The conference room door swung open, and Mike and Commander Schaeffer rushed out into the hallway.

Winnie wondered if she was seeing things again.
“Commander Schaeffer?”

Ben looked just as confused. “But you’re supposed to be dead.”

“There’s no time to explain!” Mike ran toward a nearby stairwell and waved for them to follow.

“Let’s go!” Commander Schaeffer pushed them onward.
“We’ve got to find my crew!”

The group quickly made their way down the stairwell. By the time they reached the main entry room to the facility, Commander Schaeffer had given the kids a brief rundown of how his space mission had been hijacked.

“We’ve already been through most of this building,” Winnie said. “We didn’t see any sign of your crew.”

“Then they must’ve been moved to another part of the base.” Commander Schaeffer pointed to a door across the room. Sunlight leaked in from beneath its base. “This way!”

With Commander Schaeffer in the lead, the group moved quickly, snaking their way around the various obstacles that littered the room.

“As long they don’t know that we’ve escaped, we’ve got the element of surprise on our side. Maybe we can check some of the nearby buildings,” Commander Schaeffer said. He’d almost made it to the door when he tripped over a box and stumbled forward into the wall. His bandaged shoulder hit first, and he cried out in pain.

Ben rushed to his side. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Commander Schaeffer winced. “My arm got a little banged up earlier, but it’ll be okay. Do you mind opening the door for me?”

Ben cracked the door and carefully looked out. “I can see a hangar right next door. And the coast looks clear!”



Munson and two of his men ran into the upstairs hallway and

saw that the door to the conference room was wide open. They could hear a steady thumping coming from the nearby storage closet.

“Get him out of there,” Munson growled.

As his men began working on the door, Munson grabbed his two-way radio. “Code Red! Repeat: Code Red! I want this whole base locked up tighter than a drum!”



Commander Schaeffer and the kids ran out of the building and sprinted across the open yard to the neighboring hangar. Ben, the last to cross, was just entering when an alarm siren started blaring.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Commander Schaeffer said dryly as he took in their surroundings.

Other than the military tank that Mike had spotted earlier, the hangar was empty.

“What next, Commander?” Spence asked.

“I’ll have to find my crew later,” Commander Schaeffer replied. “First, we need to find a way to get you kids out of here so you can bring back some help.”

“But how?” Mike asked. “It’s probably crawling with Munson’s men out there!”

“Well, I might have an idea.” Commander Schaeffer pointed to his arm in the sling. “But since this arm is useless, I’m going to have to rely on you guys.”



Munson’s men, now heavily armed, fanned out quickly across the outside yard. A couple took positions in a tall, three-story watchtower. Two more sat in a nearby jeep—ready to run down anyone who tried to escape.

Munson walked to the middle of the yard and raised a megaphone to his mouth.

“Commander Schaeffer! I’ve hidden your crew where you will never find them! I’d hate to have to drag them out here—

one by one—and make them pay for your stubbornness. You would be wise to surrender immediately!” Munson lowered the megaphone and waited.

There was no response.

“If you’re thinking of making a break, let me point out a few things you may not have considered,” Munson continued. “This base is surrounded on all sides by a quarter mile of open desert. Let me assure you that my snipers are very skilled. You wouldn’t make it ten yards before they had you in their sights. It’s over, Commander!” Munson lowered his megaphone, once more, and waited for a response.

Again, all was quiet but the whistle of the arid desert wind.

“Commander, this is your last warning!” Munson’s voice was showing his impatience. “Give up, now! There is absolutely no way to escape!”

Munson never heard the sound of the engine, so he was completely caught off guard when the wall of the nearby hangar exploded outward violently. The M-1 Abrams tank surged forward with a roar, its twin diesel engines belching clouds of dense black smoke.

Munson dropped his megaphone and dove for cover.

The seventy-three-ton mechanical monster plowed through everything in its path. A cement retaining wall didn’t even slow it down. Bricks shattered and bounced out of the way. Those that didn’t were ground to fine dust under the tank’s heavy metal treads. An abandoned old tow truck was flattened into a six-inch pile of scrap metal in mere seconds.

“Stop them!” Munson yelled to the snipers in the guard tower.

The snipers opened fire on the tank, but the bullets harmlessly ricocheted off the tank’s steel plates. The Abrams accelerated straight for the watchtower. It tore through one of the metal legs in the base. The supports groaned loudly as the tower tilted forward. The guards inside jumped free as it finally crashed to the ground.



“Yeah!” Mike yelled from the driver’s seat of the tank.

“Way to go, Mike!” Ben hollered down from the turret.

“Winnie! Spence!” Commander Schaeffer shouted. “How’s this beast doing?”

“We’ve got plenty of fuel!” Winnie yelled from her position in front of the tank’s gauges.

“All systems are looking good!” Spence added from his position beside her.

“Easy, Mike,” instructed Commander Schaeffer from the captain’s seat. “Pull that left lever to bring her into second, and push the right pedal with your foot to bring her about.”

Driving a tank requires the use of both arms and legs. Since Commander Schaeffer had an injured arm, the duty of driving fell to Mike. He could only see out a small narrow window directly in front of him.

Commander Schaeffer and Ben could see a little better because their positions in the tank were outfitted with periscopes. Winnie and Spence bounced around on the floor of the tank, blind to what was going on outside.

“I can see the main gate!” Ben shouted. “It’s dead ahead!”

“Straighten her up and give it some gas!” Commander Schaeffer hollered. “Now, Mike. Now!”

“Hang on!” Mike yelled.

The Abrams crashed through the main gate like it was made of cardboard and headed out across the open desert.

Chapter 17

POP'S OLD BLUE SUBURBAN bounced down a dirt road, kicking up a trail of dust in its wake. Each of Pop's passengers had a different reason for hitching a ride with him that afternoon. Sheriff Smitty wanted to pick up the patrol truck that he'd abandoned the night before. Doc Benson wanted to test the area for toxic particles. Lyle and Skye Wilson just wanted a ride home.

"I think we're getting close." Smitty pointed ahead and tried to shield his aching eyes from the harsh rays of the sun. His head still hurt from whatever chemical he had come into contact with the night before. "My truck should be just up ahead."

"Pop, do you mind if I lower the window?" Doc Benson asked from the backseat.

"Not at all."

Doc Benson lowered the window and stuck a strange-looking handheld device out the window. It had a small, funnel-shaped chrome piece on the top and a black-and-white LED readout on its face.

"Doc, what did you say that thing did again?" Smitty asked.

"It measures trace particles found in the air," Doc explained. "I have a theory—based on your bloodwork—that all three of you were exposed to an airborne substance last night. If my hypothesis is correct, it would explain why you experienced such vivid hallucinations."

"Hallucinations?" Smitty shook his head and pointed to the Wilsons. "You may be right about these two, but what happened to me last night was absolutely real!"

Skye reached forward and patted Smitty on his shoulder. "You should listen to the doc, Sheriff. He's just trying to help."

"Yeah," Lyle agreed. "Besides, the sooner we can clear up

what caused you to trip out, the sooner we can get to the real problem: stopping the octo-aliens.”

“*Aliens?*” Smitty said mockingly. “Ha!”

“*Invading enemy soldiers?*” Lyle shot back. “Ha!”

Smitty pointed to the road ahead. “Yeah? Well, just wait until you see all the damage they did to my truck. Then we’ll see who’s laughing.”



Mike had the throttle wide open, but in the deep sand, the heavy tank was only able to reach a top speed of thirty miles per hour. A pursuing jeep quickly caught up and began pacing the tank from behind. At the wheel, Munson maneuvered the jeep as close to the back of the tank as he dared. Beside him, one of his men took aim at the tank with a pistol.

“Don’t waste your time, Lars.” Munson pushed the gun aside.

“Yeah, well, how do you propose we stop them?”

Munson pointed to a long wooden box in the back of the jeep. “I think you’ll find that’s the perfect tool for the job.”

Lars found a rocket-propelled grenade launcher inside the box—a military weapon that was first developed in the 1950s to stop a tank in its tracks.

Lars raised the RPG, more commonly known as a bazooka, to his shoulder and sighted in on his target. The uneven off-road conditions made it difficult to keep the tank in his sights, but Lars took his time and slowly squeezed the trigger.

With a flash of flame, the rocket shot forward and would have made contact, had the tank not dropped into a shallow gully at that exact moment. The missile grazed the top of the tank and then continued on—finally hitting and detonating in a distant sand dune.



“What was that?” Mike asked. He struggled to keep control of the tank as sand and debris rained down from the sky.

Commander Schaeffer peered into his periscope. "I can't see what's behind us. But my guess is someone's back there with an RPG. Ben, turn the turret around and have a look."

"Turn the turret," Ben mumbled to himself as he stared down at a panel of unfamiliar switches, knobs, and lights. "Um . . ."

"Hurry, Ben!" Winnie called up from the floor. "Someone back there is shooting at us!"

Ben shrugged and flicked a random switch, causing an alarm to blare loudly. "Nope. No good. That's not it. Let's see . . ."



Sheriff Smitty stepped out of the Suburban, with a look of utter disbelief on his face. His patrol truck was parked off to the side of the road, exactly as he'd left it. The driver's door was still open. The topographic map was still neatly laid out across the front bench seat. And other than being covered with a thin layer of dust, the truck looked exactly as it had when Smitty had driven it out to desert on his way to the Wilsons' trailer.

"I can't believe it." Smitty stared at the truck, his mind slowly processing what his eyes were telling him. "The windshield was completely destroyed. I mean, this whole truck was a mess."

Pop walked up and placed an understanding hand on Smitty's shoulder. "Doc thinks the fog you and the Wilsons saw is responsible for what you experienced."

"So, the soldiers, the explosions and gunfire . . . all of it was—"

"Just in your imagination."

"But it seemed so—"

"No matter how real it seemed, you weren't in a war zone, Smitty," Pop said. "The sooner you accept that the better."

"I suppose you're right." A slow, embarrassed smile grew across Smitty's face. "It's kind of humiliating. But at least my new truck's not all shot up."

"Can we get going now?" Lyle called from the Suburban.

“I want to take some plaster casts of the alien footprints before they’re gone.”

Smitty and Pop were just turning to leave when the roar of approaching engines abruptly caught their attention.

Peering into the distance, they could see an Abrams tank cresting a dune. A moment later, a military jeep followed. Both appeared to be in quite a hurry and headed in their direction. Without warning, a rocket was fired from the jeep. It missed its intended target and exploded in a nearby hillside.

Pop crouched defensively and ran to take shelter by the Suburban. “Smitty! C’mon!”

Smitty calmly stood in the open, still smiling. “Okay! So even though that *seems* real, there is no tank. No jeep shooting at it. It’s all my imagination. Right?”



Ben pushed yet another button on the control panel and waited to see what would happen. Although the turret didn’t rotate, several lights did begin to flash. “Well, *that’s* something.”

“Ben!” Spence yelled. “We need to know what’s going on back there!”

“I’m trying!” Ben mashed his hand against a bunch of buttons simultaneously, and unexpectedly, the turret started to rotate for a moment. “I found it!”

“Good! Keep going! See what’s back there,” Spence encouraged.

Ben looked at the panel with a puzzled expression. “Now, which one did I push?”

A red blinking button caught his eye. “Oh! That’s gotta be it!”



The tank was thirty yards parallel to Pop’s Suburban when Ben accidentally pushed the “Fire” button. A split second later, the tank’s cannon erupted with an explosion so loud that it shook the ground and raised dust in all directions. The

concussive blast wave knocked Smitty's cowboy hat off his head and blew it across the road. The warhead hit directly under Smitty's truck and launched it straight up in the air—cartwheeling end over end.

"Far out!" Lyle yelled as the truck crashed back down to earth.

Smitty shook his head and chuckled while he pointed at the burning heap. "It all just looks and sounds so realistic!"



Because of the limited visibility from the driver's seat of the tank, Mike never saw Pop's Suburban or Smitty's truck. He passed right by with only one thing on his mind—getting everyone to safety.

Meanwhile, with Commander Schaeffer's help, Ben had finally figured out the controls to the turret. He now had it properly rotated into a position to see what was behind them.

"There's only a jeep back there. Two guys are in it," Ben reported, staring through his eyepiece. "Whoa! Not good! Not good! One of them has got a bazooka or something—and he's reloading!"



Chuck Munson was beginning to worry. If the tank couldn't be stopped, then his entire operation was at risk. "How many rockets have you got left?" Munson asked Lars.

Lars settled the launcher on his shoulder and took aim. "This is the last one."

"Then take your time. And aim lower. Your last two shots were too high."

Lars took a deep breath and waited for the jeep to hit a smooth stretch of sand before he fired. This time his aim was true. The warhead rocketed in a perfectly straight line and hit the tank squarely in the back panel. The ventilation grates disintegrated in a blinding flash and shrapnel tore into the engine compartment.



“We’re hit!” screamed Ben.

“She’s losing power!” Mike called from the driver’s seat.

Spence studied the gauges on an instrument panel. “Oil pressure’s dropping in both engines!”

Loud banging noises from the engine compartment grew louder by the moment, while the interior of the tank began to fill with smoke.

“What do we do now?” Winnie asked.

Commander Schaeffer reached into the pocket of his space suit. “Do any of you kids play baseball?”

“I play softball,” Winnie offered. “But what does that have to do with—”

“What position?”

“Pitcher.”

“Perfect!” Commander Schaeffer handed her his last vial of the compound. “I’ve got a job for you!”



Munson pulled his jeep alongside the slowing tank and handed Lars a pistol. “Prepare to board!”

Lars crouched with one foot on the seat and the other on the doorsill. He was about to make the leap across to the tank when the top hatch of the tank suddenly sprang open and Winnie popped up into view.

“Got something for you!” she yelled.

Winnie threw the vial as hard as she could onto the hood of the jeep.

The glass container shattered into pieces, creating a smoke-like cloud and coating the front of the jeep in a thick green powder. No longer able to see through the windshield, Munson veered the jeep away from the tank and pulled to a stop.

Lars immediately began wiping the windshield with a rag, but the dust just smeared, making the visibility worse.

“Forget about that!” Munson yelled in frustration.

“But they’re getting away.” Lars pointed to where the wounded tank was just disappearing over a hill.

“They’re not going anywhere!” Munson smashed out the front windshield with a tire iron. “All we gotta do is follow their smoke trail.” Munson slammed the stick shift into gear and took off toward the tank.

It wasn’t hard to track the wounded tank. It had left deep tread marks in the sand. And they could see a huge column of black smoke just ahead.

“There they are!” Lars shouted.

As they drove closer, the plume of smoke grew bigger and bigger. Soon smoke was blotting out most of the horizon.

Almost too much smoke, thought Munson. And where there’s smoke, there’s always fire!

As the jeep crested the top of a sand dune, the thick haze grew so dense that Munson could no longer see what lay ahead. When the jeep finally broke through the smoke, his eyes went wide with fear.

A huge wall of orange flames roared before him.

Munson instinctively hit the brakes, but the vehicle was going too fast to stop in time. Munson screamed in terror as the blazing inferno swallowed the jeep whole.

Lars was startled by the scream and turned to see Munson wildly waving his arms around for no apparent reason.

“What’s wrong?”

“Fire!” Munson screamed. “No! Not again!”

Lars could see no sign of flames and realized that they were coming up to the tank.

“Hey! You’re passing them!” Lars yelled. “Slow down!”

“Not again!” Munson let go of the steering wheel and slapped at the imaginary flames on his clothes. “Get it off! Get it off me! Don’t let me burn!”

“Watch where you’re going!” screamed Lars, pointing ahead to a steep gully.

The warning came too late. And Munson was too caught up with his hallucinations to care.

The jeep flew off the edge of the gully and soared thirty yards through the air before landing in the bottom of a dry

riverbed. The wheels hit slightly sideways and caught in the soft sand, causing the jeep to roll multiple times before coming to rest.

Both Munson and Lars were thrown free, but now lay unconscious.



Surrounded by smoke, Mike crawled up and out of the tank's top hatch. He was just extending a helpful hand back down to the person following him when a stern voice called out.

"Freeze!"

Mike did as he was told and held perfectly still.

"You on the tank! Don't make any fast moves. Just slowly turn around."

Once again, Mike complied. As he turned around, a relieved smile spread across his face. "Smitty? Is that you?"

Pop and Smitty stood ten yards away, looking both bewildered and shocked.

"Mike?" they exclaimed in unison.

"Yeah! It's me," Mike assured them.

"What are you doing up there?" Pop asked.

"Pop! Smitty! Have I got a surprise for you!"

"Son, I think we've all had enough surprises for one day," Pop told him.

Mike reached back down into the hatch opening. "Yeah, but I know you're gonna like this one!"

Commander Schaeffer rose out of the tank and waved a hello with his good arm. "Hiya, Pop! Smitty!"

Pop and Smitty's jaws dropped open.

"What in the blue blazes!" Smitty mumbled, not sure if he was hallucinating again.

Pop just shook his head and grinned. "God sure works in mysterious ways."

Chapter 18

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, a twin-blade Chinook helicopter slowly circled the Last Chance Gas and Diner. The pilot was looking for a safe place to land among the hundreds of people who had gathered and were expectantly waiting. Good news travels fast—and such was the case in what some were already calling “the *Explorer* miracle.”

Military personnel had roped off an area for the helicopter to land, but once the wheels finally set down, the crowd ignored the barriers and surged forward.

As the door of the helicopter opened, a cheer went up from the crowd. Mike, Winnie, Ben, and Spence were the first ones to step off. Though some in the crowd wondered who they were, word was quickly spreading how four kid detectives had solved the case of a lifetime.

When Commander Schaeffer appeared in the door, followed by his crew, the roar from the crowd was almost deafening.

Commander Schaeffer held up a hand to shield his eyes as he attempted to look past the throng of yelling reporters and flashing cameras.

“Ron!” Rebekah Schaeffer yelled from the back of the crowd. With Chloe in one arm and Rachel in tow, Rebekah desperately tried to find a way to get to him through all the onlookers.

Ignoring the reporters’ questions, Commander Schaeffer pushed his way through the crowd, ran up to his family, and embraced them in a giant bear hug.

It was a joyous, magical moment. Every person there couldn’t help but smile—even the usually stoic reporters.

Winnie and Spence took questions from the media and posed for photos with the crew of the *Explorer*.

Ben excitedly explained to Smitty how a cosmic clown had

almost stopped him from saving the day.

As for Mike, he stood off by himself, unable to take his eyes off the Schaeffer family.

He watched as Commander Schaeffer wiped the tears from his wife's eyes and assured her that everything was okay. Rachel hung onto his leg like she would never let go again. Little Chloe squealed, "Daddyyy!"

It was exactly the kind of reunion Mike had dreamt of experiencing for over seven years. Only in his version, Mike and his mom rushed to his dad's side.

Pop walked up beside Mike and placed an arm around his shoulder. "What a day, eh, Mike?"

Mike quickly wiped a tear from his eye and looked up at Pop with a brave but weak smile. "Yeah."

The Schaeffer girls giggled as their father smothered them in kisses.

"You think that might be us one day?" Mike asked.

Pop considered the question for a moment, then finally nodded his head. "I do."

"Trust God and walk one step at a time, right, Pop?"

"That's right, Mike. One step at a time."

About the Author

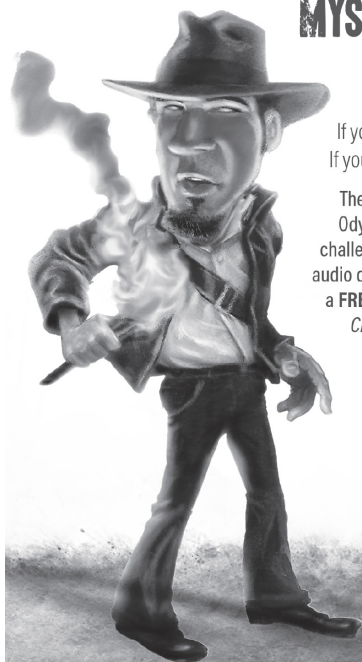
ROBERT VERNON got his start in the entertainment industry while working for television legends Johnny Carson and Dick Clark. He was a founding member of Focus on the Family's film department, where he wrote, produced, and directed many of the Adventures in Odyssey video episodes.

Robert is the creator of The Last Chance Detectives. He produced the video series, wrote the screenplays, and directed *Legend of the Desert Bigfoot*. He also wrote and directed the Last Chance Detectives audio series, *Last Flight of the Dragon Lady*.

Robert lives with his wife, Kristen, in Santa Clarita, California. They have three sons, one grandson, and a dog named Chance.



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